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Constance & Nellie

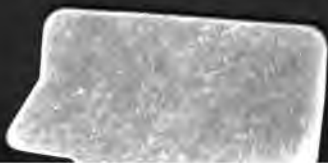


or
the Lost Will





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THE CHILDREN IN THE CLOISTERS.

INSTANCE AND NELLIE;

OR,

THE LOST WILL.

BY

EMMA DAVENPORT,

AUTHOR OF 'OUR BIRTHDAYS,' 'THE HAPPY HOLIDAYS,'
'HOLIDAYS ABROAD,' ETC.

With Frontispiece by T. S. Hale.



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THE LOST WILL;
OR,
THE ABBEY AND THE LODGE.

CHAPTER I.

Agnes and Georgie Walton and their Friend Constance—A Picnic in Fern Valley—The Missing Cousin from Australia—Some Account of him.

IF we go to our Fern Valley to-morrow, mamma,' said Agnes Walton to her mother, 'may we not ask Constance to go with us?'

'Are you sure, dear Agnes,' replied her mother, 'that Constance likes and enjoys your country expeditions? The last time she joined us, when we spent the day at the Fall, I thought that Georgie, at least, would have been happier without her.'

'I think I should, mamma,' said Georgie. 'You know Constance is always full of what I call fine

fancies ; and sometimes she will enter into none of our fun, and says this thing is not ladylike, and that is like a schoolboy, till she quite provokes me.'

'I do not remember, Georgie,' said her sister, 'that Constance refused to join in anything that day, excepting getting up into the old yew tree that mamma might have a little hunt for us ; and it certainly was true that the rough bark and the ivy would most likely have spoiled her nice muslin frock.'

'Oh, Agnes,' replied Georgie, 'don't you remember she would not run down the lane in time to get into the farmyard to see the cows milked, and would walk gently and slowly, so that the gate was shut ; and then she would not let me shout loud enough to make Jenny hear ! Besides, Agnes, she need not have said, "Getting into trees may do very well for you with your strong cotton print frocks ;" as much as to say, "I never wear such things."'

Mrs. Walton smiled at the indignant tone in which Georgie said this. 'It was that little speech that affronted you, I suppose, Georgie,' she said. 'Altogether, you are not so fond of Constance as Agnes is.'

'She thinks so much of herself, mamma,' Georgie answered, 'because she lives in the Abbey and we live in the Lodge, and because her mamma is Lady Constance, and you are only Mrs. Walton ; and I do not agree that she is so much better than us.'

‘And how is it, Agnes,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘that you do not also fret at this assumed superiority?’

‘You say “assumed,” mamma,’ interrupted Georgie; ‘then you do not think she is really superior to us?’

‘Certainly I should not think her so, merely because she is richer; and I have not yet discovered whether she is your superior in disposition or in sense. So, until I have made up my mind on that point, I will only ask Agnes what she thinks of Constance.’

‘I like her very much, mamma,’ replied Agnes; ‘and I do not wonder that she should not always like our way of living and doing things, because she has always been in great luxury herself. So I do not mind when she shows a little contempt for our clothes, and our house, and all our things.’

This conversation took place at the modest little tea-table of Mrs. Walton, who lived, as Georgie had said, in the Lodge of Norland Abbey. For it had once been the Lodge; and when the entrance to the Abbey had been altered, and a new Lodge built, the old one had been added to and made into a very pretty little house for the use of an old Mrs. Norland, who preferred a small abode of her own, when her son married and brought a young wife to the Abbey. After the death of that old lady, it was let to Mrs. Walton, a widow with two little girls, who was glad to

secure a beautiful little home in the park of her friend and schoolfellow, Lady Constance Norland.

The only child and heiress of Norland Abbey naturally became very intimate with the two little girls at the South Lodge ; and her mother, knowing the many disadvantages that beset an only child, was well pleased that she should spend much of her time with two companions so desirable in every way as Agnes and Georgie. The Abbey was a large straggling building of many different dates. First it had been a monastery, of which still remained a ruined refectory, a cloister, and a roofless chapel. Part of the old building had been added to and converted into a dwelling-house ; and later again a modern part had been built in an Elizabethan style, that harmonized well enough with the actual ruins that formed the background. The park and woods were extensive and beautiful. There was a river and a lake, and everything that could render a country abode delightful, one of the prettiest spots in the whole place being the abode of Mrs. Walton. She had taken much pains with her garden—one corner especially, through which ran a little rill, had been set apart for ferns ; and collecting these in the different dells and lanes of the neighbourhood was a favourite amusement with the two girls. One valley, especially, distant about five miles, was fertile in ferns ; and the morning after the

conversation respecting Constance, Mrs. Walton sent a messenger to the Abbey with a note from Agnes, in answer to which Constance came herself, and ran up to the little room which Georgie and Agnes called their own.

‘Am I not good,’ she cried, ‘to come so soon? I was quite glad to hear you were going to Fern Valley, because I want some ferns too. I suppose you will take your dinner with you, so I brought a basket of peaches with me for dessert.’

‘Thank you, Constance,’ said Agnes; ‘we shall be ready to go in about half an hour: you see we have not quite finished our exercises. Will you go into the drawing-room to mamma, or into the garden, till we have done our work?’

‘I will stay here,’ said Constance; ‘I will not interrupt you; but I like to sit in your bow, Georgie.’

There were two bow windows to the girls’ own study, or morning-room. It was on the first floor, and was over the hall and the small dining-room. Each sister had appropriated one of the bows. The windows were down to the floor; and outside was a broad balcony, which they had filled with flower-pots, so that it was like two tiny rooms and two tiny gardens. These windows had a beautiful view over the park, the lake, and the opposite wood, with the turrets of the Abbey just appearing among the trees.

Constance allowed sometimes that she had not so snug and pretty a nook in her own sitting-room ; and she now sat quietly on a low stool looking out at the landscape, whilst her two companions went on with their writing. Presently Agnes came and put her hands over Constance's eyes.

‘What are you thinking of?’ she said ; ‘you are very grave this morning. I have finished and put away my desk and books ; shall we go and see if mamma is nearly ready?’

‘Yes,’ said Constance, starting up ; ‘but I will tell you what I was thinking—and it is odd that I never thought it before, though I have so often sat looking out of this window,—why, that every single thing I see now, excepting that far-off hill, over the wood, is my own, at least it will be one day : it is almost as good as mine now, as it is my father's. Look ! the lake, the Abbey, the river, the woods, the deer, and everything !’

‘Not everything,’ said Georgie ; ‘not these flower-pots and not this balcony.’

‘Not the flower-pots, certainly ; but the balcony, yes ! Don't you know that Mrs. Walton rents this house of papa?’

‘Yes,’ replied Georgie ; ‘and as long as she rents it, it is hers, and not yours !’

‘Nonsense !’ exclaimed Agnes, ‘what does it

signify to whom it belongs? It is a dear pretty place, and we are lucky to live in it. Come, mamma is calling us.'

The pony carriage was at the door; and having safely stowed under the front seat their basket of provisions and Constance's peaches, Mrs. Walton took her place.

'Will you come in front with me, Constance,' said Mrs. Walton, 'or sit with one of the girls?'

'Sit with me behind,' said Agnes, 'and Georgie will go with mamma.' And being thus seated, away started the impatient little pony.

'Did you remember,' said Georgie, 'to put in the trowel and knife and basket for the ferns?'

'Certainly,' replied her sister; 'that was our chief affair, you know. How pleasant this is, dear mamma! I like nothing so well, I think, as driving quickly along these lovely lanes. I am so glad you can have a pony. We should miss it very much now. Do you not like this, Constance?'

'Yes, I like it,' replied Constance; 'even this little basket carriage is pleasant: of course a larger carriage is more comfortable, and a larger horse goes faster; but for all that, I do like driving with you.'

'Especially,' said Georgie, 'when all that you see is your own, or one day to be so, as you took care to tell us just now.'

Constance coloured a little. 'You always catch me up so, Georgie,' she said; 'you need not have repeated that. Not that I see anything wrong in saying it if I thought it. Do you think there is any harm, Mrs. Walton, in my valuing and loving this place? Why should I not feel pride and pleasure in it?'

'To a certain extent,' replied Mrs. Walton, 'I think it well and right that you should love and value your own inheritance; but I can understand what vexes Georgie in many such remarks of yours. It is that you rather despise others because they have not the same worldly advantages. That, you must allow, is unjust, because it was by no effort or merit of your own that you became the heiress of the Abbey.'

Constance was silent.

'Well, mamma,' said Agnes, 'we will not talk about Constance's possessions, but we will enjoy our drive. This lane is one of the nicest in the world, there is such a good shade. Look up, Constance. How light and pretty the leaves are over our heads—quite an arch! Do you know what trees they are?'

'Indeed I do not,' replied Constance; 'I scarcely know the name of any tree. I know the chestnuts when the flowers are on them, and that is all.'

'These are beeches,' said Agnes; 'but I do not nearly know all the trees. Shall we try to learn them all?'

Georgie was on the point of saying, 'Not know the names of your own possessions !' but a look from her mother checked her, so she only remarked—

'I think I know most of the forest trees, Constance. I used to be so fond of looking at Evelyn's *Silva*, with nice pictures of all the leaves. Try me now, Agnes, as we go along. I see nothing but beeches at present, and they are as beautiful as any.'

'And when you know the common name of the tree,' said Mrs. Walton, 'it would be a very pleasant study, I think, to seek out where it originally came from, and for what purpose it is best adapted.'

'Yes, mamma,' said Georgie; 'I should like to learn all about the beautiful trees. I will look out everything I can find about the beech when I get home. Now we are out of the lane, we shall see some other trees. What is that large one, Agnes?'

'I do know that,' said Agnes; 'it is our own English tree, an oak; and it was found growing in England, was it not, mamma, by the Romans? Oh! that reminds me of what I often wanted to ask. The Romans found people in England—the ancient Britons, and Druids,—where did they come from, does any one know?'

'A great deal is conjectured about them,' said Mrs. Walton; 'but very little is really known. They were among the barbarous tribes that, being originally

settled in the neighbourhood of the Black Sea, overran the centre and western countries of Europe. "Celts" they are generally called; probably those that reached Britain came across from France.'

'They are not very interesting people, I think, mamma,' said Georgie; 'perhaps it is because we know so very little about them.'

'And they found England,' said Constance, 'quite full of trees, almost all forest; was it not so?'

'Forest, or swamp,' replied Mrs. Walton, 'I believe there was little else; and the chief ornament of these forests was the glorious oak tree.'

'Are there oak trees in other countries?' said Constance.

'Oh yes, in most northern countries,' replied Mrs. Walton, 'and many different species; some of those kinds found on the Himalayas and in the Indian islands differ very much. But it is enough for us to know our own tree.'

'And it is good for shipbuilding, is it not?' asked Constance.

'Yes, for that and for large buildings; anything, in fact, that requires strength and durability.'

'Do you know, mamma,' said Georgie, 'that there is a very beautiful tree at the end of Fern Valley, where we will have our dinner to-day?—it makes a splendid shade.'

‘I do not remember the tree,’ said her mother. ‘I know you have a great many favourites here and there.’

They were now passing through a copse, and when they reached the gate at the end, Georgie asked Constance if she knew what the gate marked.

‘No, I do not know what you mean,’ said Constance ; ‘it is the end of the wood, that is all.’

‘I will open it,’ said Georgie, ‘and let you through. Now, do you feel any difference on the other side of the gate?’

‘Oh,’ cried Agnes, ‘you mean that this is the boundary of Norland Park ; Constance is no longer on her own ground.’

‘Well,’ said Constance, smiling, ‘I do not feel a bit different ; and I wonder how you know the boundaries so much better than I do.’

‘We ride about a good deal,’ said Agnes ; ‘and our old groom and gardener, who goes with us, knows all about the country, and tells us a great many things.’

‘Do you talk to him, then, when he rides with you?’ said Constance. ‘I never say a word to my groom when I ride, and that is why I do not care for riding, except when papa takes me, it is so stupid.’

‘My old servant, Constance,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘is more like an old friend, for he has lived very many years with me, and I can entirely trust my children

with him. Would you like to join them in their rides sometimes? They can only ride one at a time, as I have but this pony and the one that Joseph rides.'

Constance hesitated.

'You would rather not, I see,' said Mrs Walton, smiling. 'I will not urge you for a reason.'

'I know the reason,' exclaimed Georgie: 'she would not like to be seen riding with old Joseph in his plain grey livery; she likes to have a smart groom on a prancing horse behind her. That is it, Constance; I always know what you think about things.'

'If you do so,' said her mother gravely, 'you are not kind in publishing thoughts which Constance may not wish to express. I hope in a little time that she will find us so well worth knowing and associating with, that she will not regard the little differences in my establishment and that of her mother.'

'Here we are at Fern Valley,' cried Agnes; 'I will open the gate;' and she sprang from the low carriage, saying, 'It is your turn at the next gate, Constance.'

The valley was a long irregular dell, one side of which had been quarried many years before, a small stony rill ran along the valley, and the other side was a hanging wood of every variety of tree. The remains of the two or three old quarries were very picturesque, rough blocks of the stone being left lying about, which were now partly covered with moss and plants, while

in the cracks and crevices of the quarry sides grew mountain ash, ivy, and creepers of many kinds. Along the rough banks of the rill, among shrubs and stones, were a great variety of ferns, and such a profusion of wild-flowers, that Mrs. Walton generally found it difficult to start homewards again. There was a little farm near the upper end of the valley, where the pony was housed and fed, and where they had often procured milk, tea-cups, and hot water, when the children had persuaded their mother to have tea as well as dinner in the valley. They drove gently along under the low boughs that overhung the cart road, and having passed quite through, and given the pony in charge of the farmer, they retraced their steps into the valley, and paused beneath a large spreading tree.

‘This is my tree, mamma,’ said Georgie: ‘is it not a beauty? You shall have a nice seat here; and we will spread our dinner just on this smooth little bit of grass. Agnes and Constance shall arrange that, whilst I make you a comfortable sort of sofa, with your book and your work-bag close by you.’

‘But, dear mamma,’ cried Agnes, ‘if you sit here at your work all the afternoon, you might as well stay at home as be out in this valley.’

‘No, my dear, I do not think so,’ said her mother. ‘It is very pleasant to sit here under this delightful shade, with the noise of that brook in my ears, and

the sweet scent of the grass and flowers filling the air. I assure you, I enjoy an idle afternoon here quite as much as you do, and make very little progress either with book or work.'

'That is right, mamma,' said Georgie; 'I like you to be very idle sometimes; and while you are doing nothing but looking about you, you can examine my large tree, and wonder what it is.'

'I can admire it,' said Mrs. Walton; 'but I need not wonder, except at its beauty, for I know the tree well.'

'It is rather like a chestnut,' said Constance, 'but not quite: it has pointed ends to the leaves.'

'You are very near,' said Georgie; 'it is a sweet or Spanish chestnut. We will get some twigs of both kinds and compare them.'

'Here comes Farmer Brown's man with our basket and a jug of water,' said Agnes; 'and as it is past one, shall we eat now, and work afterwards?'

'Just as you like,' replied her mother, 'I shall not hurry you home: the evenings are beautiful now.'

'I forgot to say,' said Constance, 'that I shall have to be at home by seven, indeed by half-past six, because I have to be dressed. There is company to dinner to-day, and mamma will expect me to be in the drawing-room.'

'Then, dear children, let us dine. You will then

have nearly three hours before we need return ; and in that time you may collect ferns enough to fill the garden.'

Their little repast was soon spread. 'There is no wine for you, Constance,' said Georgie ; 'but you see we have taken care there should be some very clear water this time, as you did not like the river water last time. I told Farmer Brown to send us this jug full from his own pump.'

'Thank you, Georgie,' Constance replied. 'I am sure you must yourself prefer clear fresh spring water to that half-warm stuff out of the river, full of flies and other insects.'

Georgie laughed. 'I never thought it warm and dirty and insipid,' she said, 'till you found it out ; but I believe you are right. In fact, the river is soft water ; is it not, mamma ?'

'Certainly,' said her mother, 'and never so pleasant to drink as spring water—that is, water directly from a spring before it has had time to soften by running over the earth.'

'And do you think,' asked Constance, 'that it is wrong or foolishly particular to like to have everything nice, even the water we drink ?'

'I think,' replied Mrs. Walton, 'that there is no harm in wishing and trying to have everything as good and clean and pleasant as possible, always provided

that you neither annoy and tease others by fastidiousness, and do not allow these cares to affect your own happiness. In short, dear Constance, it is good to be particular in moderation.'

'For instance,' cried Georgie, 'if there had been no pump near enough to supply this water, and you had not chosen to drink that from the river, you would have suffered all the afternoon from thirst, and would have made us all uncomfortable by seeing you so.'

'It is to be hoped,' said Constance, smiling, 'that my politeness would have enabled me to drink it, insects and all, rather than perplex you. But I like this best.'

'I am sorry,' said Agnes, 'that you have to be early at home: Would you prefer staying here if you could?'

'Some days I should,' Constance replied; 'but not to-day, because there is a person coming to dinner that I wish very particularly to see.'

'Well,' said Agnes, as Constance paused, 'tell us who it is you wish to see.'

'It is a cousin of papa's,' she replied, 'who has not been heard of for many years. He went to Australia, and was supposed to have died. Only this morning papa got a letter from him—at least a letter addressed to papa's old uncle, who, you know, has been dead for a long time. So papa opened it.'

‘And does he suppose it really to be an authentic letter from his cousin Oliver?’ asked Mrs. Walton.

‘Yes ; when papa took the letter in his hand, he said to mamma, “I could have declared that was poor Oliver’s scrawl ;” and when he read it, he turned red and then white, and gave it to mamma to read. Then he ordered the carriage ; and mamma told me he was gone to Plymouth to bring his cousin home. So, Agnes, I am quite anxious to see this man who has been lost in Australia for some years.’

‘Indeed !’ cried Georgie ; ‘he will be quite a curiosity. He must have been living among the savages, and eating kangaroos. I hope we shall see him, Constance.’

‘I will ask mamma if I may have you to spend the day with me to-morrow ; then you will see him at luncheon. Did you ever know him, Mrs. Walton?’

‘Certainly,’ she replied. ‘I knew him when he was very young, for he and your father used to visit some friends near my home ; and I was even staying here visiting your mother at the very time he left England. I had Agnes and Georgie both with me.’

‘Then,’ cried Constance, ‘I must have seen him, for I have always lived here.’

‘You saw him when a child of about a year old. Of course, you have no recollection of him. I see,’ she continued, ‘that you have conjured up the appear-

ance of a kind of half savage. Shall I disenchant you by saying what he is, or rather was like ?


‘Yes; pray tell me,’ said Constance. ‘I shall be quite disappointed if he is not quite unlike other people.’

‘If not much changed by his wanderings,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘you would only remark, “What a very handsome, aristocratic-looking man !” He is very like your own father, only—excuse me for saying so, Constance—taller, stouter, and handsomer. Poor fellow ! then he did not even know of his uncle’s death, and will hear it from your father when they meet.’

‘Was he fond of his uncle ?’ asked Constance—‘of old Mr. Norland ?’

‘Yes, I think he really loved him, although he left him in a fit of anger ; and his never having written for so many years certainly does not show much affection to those at home. Still we have heard none of the circumstances of his life. Now, my dear girls, suppose you collect these things, pack them in the basket, and then set about your plant-seeking.’

So, for the next hour or two, they were busily employed in searching along the edge of the stream and in the damp corners of the quarries for uncommon or rare ferns. Then they collected moss for a wet bed in the bottom of the basket ; and having tied up a large bunch of wild-flowers, they returned to the large Spanish chestnut.



‘My dears,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘I was thinking of coming to look for you. It will be best to go round by the Abbey, and leave Constance, as it would hurry her much to go up from the South Lodge in time. Have you enjoyed your hunt, and have you found anything new?’

‘I am not sure, mamma,’ replied Agnes. ‘We have two beautiful small ferns, but they may be only young ones of a larger kind ; and we have a heap of wild-flowers, one or two I do not know. We have had a nice afternoon, mamma.’

‘And you, Constance?’ asked Mrs. Walton.

‘I have been very happy,’ she replied, ‘though I have wetted my feet completely, and torn my frock, and spoiled my hat-strings. I need not have done anything of the sort ; but Georgie would make me scramble up the side of the quarry to see some wonderful nest, which was not wonderful at all when I got there ; and then Agnes persuaded me to go across the stream on some stepping-stones, and I slipped in.’

‘I am sure,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘that your mamma will not be vexed. I know she wishes you to become more active ; she thinks that, being alone, with always a nurse or a governess to take care of you, you have become too quiet, too old for your age.’

‘I know she likes me to be with Agnes and Georgie,’

said Constance ; ‘ will you let them come to dine with me to-morrow ? they will see the wonderful lost man. If you drive round to set me down, I can run in and ask mamma.’

‘ I am quite willing,’ said Mrs. Walton. ‘ Now who will run for the pony carriage ?’ Georgie set off at once.

‘ How quickly she runs !’ exclaimed Constance, as she watched her ; ‘ I should be quite out of breath already, and she will run all the way to the farm without resting a bit. I suppose that is what mamma means when she says I am not active ; certainly I cannot run in that way.’

‘ You soon will,’ said Agnes, ‘ if you come out much with us.’

‘ But what provokes me very much,’ said Constance, ‘ is, that Georgie can do all that I can quite well, besides all these runnings, and ridings, and active things, and seems to think nothing of what she knows. And I thought I had been so well taught, and had learnt so much, that I should be much forwarder than her.’

‘ Then,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘ you find that Georgie is about equal to you in her studies ? I am rather interested in hearing about that, as you have had the sole attention of an accomplished governess, and are the same age as Georgie.’

‘ I think she knows everything that I do,’ said Constance, ‘ and Agnes much more. I don’t mind

that, because she is a year older. Here comes the carriage.'

'Mamma,' cried Georgie, 'I forgot to take back the water-jug; let us go out at this end of the valley, and leave it at the farm.'

They quickly packed their ferns and flowers into the carriage and mounted, Constance beside Mrs. Walton in front.

'There, Constance,' said Agnes, 'you shall drive home in state; and we are going another way, a very pretty way—do you know it?—across the new plantation on the top of the hill.'

'I do not know it,' said Constance; 'I have never ridden or driven that way.'

They first mounted a steep hill after leaving the farm; Agnes and Georgie got down and walked.

'Shall I get out too?' asked Constance. 'I suppose they are walking to relieve the pony.'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Walton; 'but you need not move. "Sultan" can manage to take us two to the top.'

'We never have to think of such a thing with large horses, they would not feel the difference of such a weight as mine.'

'Now, Constance,' cried Agnes, 'is not this pretty? Look what a distance we can see! Now we shall follow the river till we reach the end of the lake, and get into the park; and we go down this long sloping hill

till we are at the level of the river. Now, mamma, trot away.'

It was a pleasant fresh afternoon, and the drive passed quickly.

'I wonder,' said Georgie, 'whether your papa has yet returned with his wild Australian !'

'There is mamma in the garden !' cried Constance, as they approached the house. And Lady Constance, seeing them drive past, came out of the flower garden that skirted the end of the house.

'I suppose,' she said, after she had greeted Mrs. Walton and the two girls, 'that Constance has told you our wonderful news, that our poor lost Oliver is come to light again? I expect him very shortly with my husband.'


'Indeed,' Mrs Walton replied, 'I heard Constance's account with extreme surprise. I suppose the letter gave but few details?'

'None whatever,' Lady Constance said; 'merely that he had arrived in England, and would soon be here.'

'I trust,' rejoined Mrs. Walton, 'that his coming will be a happiness to all sides. And now we will get away, as they may arrive any moment.'

'Mamma,' said Constance, 'may I not have Agnes and Georgie to-morrow to dine with me? I have made their day rather short by hurrying home.'

'Yes,' said her mother; 'I shall be glad to ensure



you companions, as probably I shall wish to be much with Oliver ; there will be a great deal to hear. And you know,' she added to Mrs. Walton, 'that we have no governess just now, and Constance is rather solitary.'

'At twelve, then, I shall expect you,' cried Constance, kissing her hand as the pony carriage drove away.





CHAPTER II.

The Waltons visit Constance—The newly-arrived Cousin—The Old Ruin and the Archery Ground—Agnes and Georgie are eager to learn from their Mother what has occurred.

THEY drove in silence for some way, till Georgie, who seldom was tired of talking, began to be tired of the quiet.

‘Mamma,’ she said, ‘I fancy you are not altogether pleased that this wandering and lost man has come back again.’

‘My dear Georgie,’ her mother replied, ‘you have taken up a habit of trying to read people’s faces, and to find out what they are thinking of; and I do not like the trick. You know I noticed it a little while back with respect to Constance, whose thoughts you published for her. If those you are with do not express their thoughts, you should suppose that they wish to keep them to themselves; and grown-up people certainly do not care to say all they think to a child like yourself. As for poor Oliver, I have been think-

ing many things about him which you would not understand.'

'And surely, mamma,' said Agnes, 'no one could feel sorry that a man supposed to be dead should be found to be alive and well!'

'Indeed not, Agnes,' replied her mother. 'If a bad man, one must rejoice that he should be allowed time to amend; and if good, every one would be glad to welcome him back.'

'Was Constance's cousin bad or good, mamma?' asked Georgie.

'He was like the greater part of us, Georgie,' said her mother; 'he had many good and fine qualities, and several bad ones. It is to be hoped that a life of difficulty for so many years has worn away all that was bad, and left him all good.'

'I see, mamma,' said Georgie, laughing, 'that you will not tell us exactly what he was; but as we shall see him to-morrow, most likely we can judge for ourselves.'

'Yes,' said her mother; 'I shall be glad to hear your opinion of him, Georgie. I know that I shall not have much trouble in obtaining it.'

All that evening the two girls were busily occupied in planting their ferns; and they were up early the following morning, in order to finish their studies and their practice at the piano, before the time for going to the Abbey; for Mrs. Walton exacted certain lessons

from them every day, and if they were interrupted or out at one time, all was to be finished at some other time in the day. It was about half a mile from the South Lodge to the Abbey; and at half-past eleven they were ready to start.

‘I know the first thing Constance will say to us, mamma,’ said Georgie: ‘“Here are the old white frocks again.” For you know, mamma, she has a number of pretty new muslin frocks made for her every summer, and she laughed so when Agnes told her that we had only two white frocks each to wear when we go out anywhere, and two or three coloured cotton ones for everyday.’

‘And you were angry, I suppose,’ said Mrs. Walton, smiling; ‘and Agnes did not mind.’

‘I was provoked, certainly, mamma. Do not you think it was very rude in Constance?’

‘Yes,’ replied her mother; ‘I do not admire her way of priding herself on her riches, and despising those who are comparatively poor. But you have to do with your own fault chiefly. Why are you angry, because she undervalues you on account of your simple dress? You know it is foolish and unjust on her part. You are equally silly to be disturbed.’

‘Well, mamma, I will try to take her sauciness to-day as quietly as Agnes does,’ said Georgie, as they went out.

When they arrived at the Abbey, they were taken into Constance's own room, rather to their disappointment, as they hoped to go into the drawing-room, and to see the wonderful wanderer.

'Well, Constance!' exclaimed Georgie, 'did he come? do tell us all about him.'


'Yes, he came,' said Constance. 'Take off your hats, and sit down. Soon after you drove away, we saw papa's carriage coming across the park, and mamma and I went to the hall door; and when they got out, mamma kissed him, and welcomed him, but I thought he did not seem very glad to get back.'

'What is he like?' asked Agnes.

'Why, as your mamma said,' replied Constance, 'he is a little like papa; the same sort of nose and mouth and eyes, but he is much bigger, and very dark indeed, with an immense black beard.'

'And is he good-natured?' asked Georgie. 'Did he talk to you?'

'No; he only said, "Is that the little thing I remember in long white clothes?" and he did not notice me any more. Then they went to dress for dinner, and I did not see him till I went in to dessert. Then he was frowning, and looking very cross, and neither papa nor mamma seemed very happy; and mamma and I soon went away into the drawing-room, and I have not seen him since.'



‘Why, you always breakfast with your mamma, do you not?’ said Agnes.


‘Oh yes; but he was not there,’ Constance replied. ‘Papa went up to his room to see if he was ready, and he was gone out. Seymour said that he went very early into the kitchen, and asked for a piece of bread and a cup of coffee, and then he inquired whether Mr. Peters, the lawyer, still lived at Burnley, and off he went. But I know he is come back again, because I heard mamma say to papa, “The children had better dine in the schoolroom;” and papa answered, “Oh no; let it be as usual; it will be pleasanter to have them.”’

Just then the luncheon-bell rang, and Constance led her companions to the dining-room. The two gentlemen were seated at the table when they went in.

‘Oliver,’ said Lady Constance, ‘you must well remember Agnes Walton; these are her two daughters. She has been a widow for some years; and now I have the pleasure of possessing her as a near neighbour.’

‘Agnes Walton!’ said the stranger. ‘Yes, certainly I remember her. Shake hands, young ones! It makes me feel an old man to see these children, shot up during the time I have been absent. Where do they live?’

‘In the South Lodge,’ said Mr. Norland. ‘After my




mother's death, we persuaded Mrs. Walton to come there.'

'I will go down and see her this afternoon,' said Oliver. 'I believe she was here the very day that I took myself off to the other hemisphere.' And Agnes felt half frightened at the great black eyes that were fixed upon her, though apparently without thinking of her at all. Then he pushed away his plate, and strode up and down the room, now and then stopping and looking out at the park. Lady Constance talked a little to the children, and attended to their dinner; and Mr. Norland was silent and absorbed. Altogether it was less pleasant than any time they remembered to have been there; and Georgie and Agnes were glad to hurry over their meal, and to leave the room with Constance. They all agreed, when safely back in the schoolroom, that Cousin Oliver was not at all pleasant, and that he might just as well have stayed in Australia.

'Now choose,' said Constance; 'what shall we do this afternoon? Shall we go to the archery ground, and play "Les graces," or bows and arrows? or shall we play in the garden? or what?'

'I should like best to go and rummage about in the ruin,' said Georgie, 'first, at any rate, and afterwards we can go to the archery ground.' So they went off to the cloisters. All along the front of



the ruin Lady Constance had made a pretty flower garden, and had planted creepers against the old walls, which hung all about the broken arches and empty windows with very pretty effect. The refectory was entered through the cloister, and most of the roof of this remained ; so that it was a delightfully cool place in the hot summer afternoons. There were stone seats all round it, still in pretty good preservation. Then there was the roofless chapel, with many old tombstones on the floor. Agnes and Georgie were fond of trying to decipher these. They were in Latin ; but they copied out the words, and Mrs. Walton helped them to make sense out of the half-obliterated epitaphs. Then there was an old kitchen, known to be such by the remains of a huge chimney, and a variety of odd little closets or chambers. The children were never tired of wandering about here. Georgie especially took pleasure in pretending to be a monk, and talking as she supposed a monk would have talked. At right angles with the ruin was the old house, or rather one wing of what had been the old house. It was a quaint-looking building of three storeys, with small turrets at intervals, reaching up to the high-pitched roof. It was only a few years since that this had been finally deserted by old Mr. Norland, who, when he had built the handsome modern front of the new house, still felt a lingering

affection for his old rooms ; and though he gave his sister and his two nephews rooms in the new part, had gone on inhabiting his old library and his old bedroom till within a few years of his decease.

‘ I do not like the look of those old rooms,’ said Constance, as they stood looking at the building ; ‘ it seems so dismal to have a great piece of uninhabited house tacked on to the one where we live ! Papa has often said he would pull down this bit.’

‘ Have you ever been into it ?’ asked Georgie.

‘ Not lately ; but I think I have a very faint idea—a sort of vision—of old uncle going out of that door, and also of going in myself, and seeing him sitting in a great leather chair. But I should not like to go in now, it would look so desolate. You know my uncle has been dead for five years, and he did not live in here latterly.’

‘ I should like excessively to go all over it,’ said Agnes, ‘ and to look at all the old rooms. Perhaps some day your mamma will let us.’

‘ You can ask her,’ replied Constance ; ‘ but you must make haste, for really papa was going to pull it down a little while ago.’

‘ Well, before he pulls it down we will hope to have a good rummage all over it,’ said Georgie. ‘ Now let us go and shoot.’

They ran to the archery ground : a high bank of grass

had been made at each end to catch the arrows ; all along one side was a pretty shady walk, and the other side was open to the park. They went into the summer-house at one corner, where all the bows, arrows, and appliances for shooting were kept ; and when they came out again, they saw Mr Norland and his cousin walking up and down the shady walk. They were talking earnestly, and Oliver very vehemently.

‘ Oh ! ’ cried Constance, ‘ I will run and ask papa to come and shoot with us.’

Agnes gently put her hand on Constance’s arm : ‘ Do you not think,’ she said, ‘ that we had better not interrupt them ? Do you see how busily they are talking ? Let us go on shooting without minding them ; they cannot help seeing us ; and if your papa likes to come to us, he will.’

‘ Perhaps it will be best,’ said Constance. ‘ I should not hesitate a bit about making papa come and join us ; but I do not much fancy that great black cousin Oliver ; so let them alone.’

Presently Lady Constance came out, and saying something to her husband, both gentlemen quickly left the archery ground, and Lady Constance came towards the three girls.

‘ Will you now go in to your tea ? ’ she said ; ‘ and I will walk down with you to the Lodge, as I want to see your mamma.’

‘But it will be just your dinner time,’ said Constance.

‘Your uncle and papa had to go with Barnley on some particular business,’ replied Lady Constance; ‘and I have put off dinner till they return. I came just now to tell them the carriage was waiting.’

‘I am glad you will walk with us, mamma,’ said Constance, ‘for of course I shall go too; I have scarcely seen you to-day.’

‘I have been extremely busy,’ returned her mother. ‘I have been hunting through boxes and desks for something your papa has lost, which is of great importance, and I am tired and vexed too at not finding it. I cannot tell you more at present.’

‘Mamma,’ Constance began again, as they walked towards the house, ‘are you glad that Cousin Oliver came back? I do not like him at all, he looks so cross; and there has been a sort of fuss and confusion ever since he arrived. Are you glad?’

Agnes pulled her arm gently, for she saw that Lady Constance’s eyes were full of tears.

‘Let us make haste with tea,’ she said to Constance; ‘then we can the sooner come out again to your mamma.’

‘What can be the matter?’ cried Constance, throwing herself on the sofa, as soon as they reached the schoolroom. ‘Mamma seems quite annoyed about something; of course it is something that this tiresome

Cousin Oliver has done or said. I wish he had stayed in Australia. I wish the kangaroos had eaten him. You need not laugh, Georgie, I hate him !'

'If I were you,' said Agnes, 'I certainly should not ask your mamma again if she is glad he came home. I should say nothing about him. Perhaps he will go away soon, and then you will be all right again.'

'I am afraid he will not go,' said Constance dolefully. 'He used to live here formerly, so I suppose he has no other home ; and I am sure it will be very disagreeable if a great black cross-looking man like that is to stay here for ever, making papa and mamma uncomfortable. But come, let us have our tea ; perhaps mamma is eager to set out.'

Constance had a large airy room as a schoolroom, with everything in it that a little girl could possibly want. It was, indeed, a contrast to the tiny little slip at the Lodge which was devoted to Agnes and Georgie. And there was as much contrast in the evening meal, which Constance called her tea. She had always cold game or chicken, abundance of fresh fruit, cakes and rolls, marmalade or preserves.

'Do you always have this sort of tea,' Georgie said ; 'or is it only in honour of us ?'

'I always have just the same,' Constance said. 'The gardener always picks out the best fruit to come in here for me.'

‘And you sit here all by yourself, with this feast ! for I call it a feast,’ said Georgie.

‘Well, it is rather solitary,’ said Constance, smiling, ‘now that Miss Ross is away ; but it is very seldom she leaves me. I expect her back next week. Oh, mamma,’ she exclaimed, as Lady Constance came in, ‘we are nearly ready ; are you in a hurry ?’

‘Constance gave us such a large tea,’ said Agnes, ‘that we were much longer getting through it than we are at home, where we have only bread and butter. But now, Constance, I am ready.’

Their hats were soon on, and they set out down the park road. Lady Constance was very silent, and Agnes, feeling that something was amiss, did not venture to speak to her ; and she was glad that Georgie engaged Constance in jumping backwards and forwards across the little rill that ran down the park, at some places not above two or three feet broad. It was a relief when they reached the Lodge. Agnes ran in to tell her mamma Lady Constance had come with them, and Mrs. Walton met her at the door.

‘Am I to congratulate you,’ she said, ‘on your acquisition ? Will poor Oliver’s arrival be a pleasure and comfort ?’

‘I have very much to say on that subject,’ she replied ; ‘let us go in.’

Mrs. Walton took her into the little drawing-room ;

and the three girls, seeing they were not wanted, went into the garden. In about half an hour Constance was sent for, and went home with her mother.

Georgie immediately assailed her mother with questions. 'Do tell us something about this strange, disagreeable-looking Oliver,' she said ; 'he has put Mr. Norland in a bad temper ; at least he said scarcely a word to us, and generally he is so nice and pleasant ; and he has vexed Lady Constance, for she looked grave and sad. Do tell us what he has done, or is going to do.'

'You say nothing, Agnes,' said Mrs Walton ; 'are you not curious too ?'

'Yes, mamma,' replied Agnes, 'I confess that I am very curious ; for I cannot imagine why the arrival of a missing cousin should cause anything but joy. But I did not ask, because Lady Constance would say nothing when her own daughter asked her ; so I did not know whether you would wish to tell us.'

'Constance must soon hear,' said Mrs Walton ; 'and in case she should come down here suddenly, I think it is best to explain the whole matter to you. Sit down by me and I will tell you about it.'



CHAPTER III.

Mrs. Walton relates to her Daughters the Early History of Frederic and Oliver Norland—They hear of the Loss of the Will—Mr. Norland and Lady Constance decide to leave the Abbey—Constance goes to reside at the Lodge with Agnes and Georgie.

THE girls settled themselves comfortably in the corner of the sofa.

‘Now I must begin,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘rather far back. You perhaps do not know how these cousins were related. Old Mr. Norland, the last possessor of this place, had one brother and one sister. The brother died several years ago, leaving his son Oliver to the care of his uncle, with the idea certainly that Oliver would inherit the Abbey at his uncle’s death, for he was his nearest relation, and his lawful heir. Then Mr. Norland’s sister married a distant cousin bearing the same name ; and when he died, five or six years after their marriage, the widow, with one son, came to live with her brother at the Abbey. So, you see, Mr. Norland was left in charge of Oliver Norland

and Frederic Norland—one the son of his brother, and one the son of his sister ; and both these boys grew up under his roof. But Frederic was always his favourite, and deservedly so, for he was amiable and prepossessing in every way, whilst Oliver was impetuous and obstinate, with a fiery temper that often gave much trouble and annoyance to his uncle. Mr. Norland was very desirous that both boys should be brought up to some profession ; and Frederic at once acquiesced, and went to study for the bar in London ; but Oliver refused to do anything, though his uncle gave him the choice of any pursuit he fancied. And he stayed here, leading a wild irregular life, and rendering himself anything but a comfort to his uncle or to his aunt. Frederic married, and settled himself in a little home in London ; and his occasional visits to the Abbey made the chief pleasure of the old man's life.'

'Then, mamma,' said Agnes, 'Constance did not always live here, as she thought, but in London?'

'She was born in London,' replied her mother ; 'but was scarcely more than a year old when she was brought here by her parents to visit Mr. Norland. Lady Constance was, as you know, an old friend and playmate of mine ; and at her request, old Mr. Norland sent me a kind invitation to stay some time at the Abbey whilst she and her husband were there.

I brought you both with me. I was witness to some painful scenes between Mr. Norland and Oliver, who had involved himself deeply in racing debts, many of which his uncle had paid. Old Mr. Norland was at that time inhabiting some rooms in the old part of the house.

‘Oh yes,’ said Agnes ; ‘Constance was telling us that she had an idea of seeing him go into the door that opens from the flower garden in front of the cloisters.’

‘Well, whenever he had been much annoyed by Oliver, it was his habit to go away to his own library—for you know there is also a large handsome library in the new part—and there he used to stay for hours, until Lady Constance used to go and coax him to come back to us. He said very little about Oliver to any one, and never alluded in any way to the inheritance of Norland Abbey. Oliver had been absent some days. We heard him return late one evening after we had all gone upstairs. And next morning, when I was going down to breakfast with Lady Constance, we heard loud and angry voices in the breakfast-room, and we paused on the staircase, not liking to intrude. As we were turning to go upstairs again, Oliver hurried out into the hall. He rushed upstairs, not taking any notice of us, and we heard him knocking things about in his own room. We went

down into the breakfast-room. Mr. Norland was walking up and down, looking much agitated. Lady Constance went and kissed him, as was her custom, but he shook his head and went away to his own old room.

‘Was he fond of her, mamma?’ asked Georgie.

‘Very,’ replied Mrs. Walton. ‘She was always a most pleasing and winning person; and I am sure old Mr. Norland often regretted that law and justice pointed to Oliver as his nearest heir.’

‘Well, mamma, where did Mr. Oliver show himself again?’ asked Georgie.

‘We heard him shout out of his window to one of the grooms, who, in about ten minutes, brought a dog-cart to the door; and Oliver, carrying a leather bag and a gun-case, strode down the stairs, flung himself into the dog-cart, and drove furiously away. The horse was almost at a gallop before he reached the Lodge.’

‘And where was young Mr. Norland, Constance’s papa?’ asked Agnes.

‘It happened that he had gone out early—I forget with what object—and he returned just as we lost sight of Oliver through the park gate. We told him what had occurred, and he said, “He will be back in a day or two; he has often started away like that, after a quarrel with my uncle.” But he never came back. After a week or two, Mr. Norland sent Frederic to search for him; and at last he found that he

had gone on board an emigrant ship bound for Melbourne.'

'A very good riddance, too,' cried Georgie. 'What a pity he ever came back!'

'I do not think it is right to say that, quite,' said Agnes. 'But, mamma, is anything else causing trouble now at the Abbey? What does he want to do?'

'That is just the painful part of my story,' said Mrs. Walton. 'When Oliver found that his cousin was in possession of Norland Abbey, he inquired by what right he had made himself the master of the property. Frederic replied, that as every one supposed Oliver to be dead, not having written or shown himself for eleven years, he should naturally have succeeded his uncle as his nearest heir; but that he had even more reason than that for considering it as his own, for that when it was known that Oliver had gone to Australia without a word to his uncle, Mr. Norland had called Fred into his library, and said that in future he must consider himself as his heir; that he must leave London and live entirely with him. But, said Oliver, unless he made a will to that effect, a speech of that sort is not binding, and I shall dispute your right. I am the son of his only brother, and my claim is indisputable.'

'Then, mamma,' said Agnes, 'if there is not a will, can Oliver claim it really?'

‘I fear he can,’ replied Mrs. Walton. ‘He went himself to the lawyer who used to act for old Mr. Norland, and heard from him that there was actually a will made soon after Oliver’s departure to Australia. That will left all to Fred ; but Mr. Peters never had charge of it, and said it must be among the papers kept by Mr. Norland himself.’

‘Then, mamma,’ said Georgie, ‘it must have been that news from the lawyer that made him look so dreadfully cross at luncheon.’

‘Probably,’ replied her mother. ‘The afternoon was spent in hunting through every desk, drawer, and cabinet for that will, but without success. Lady Constance suggested that it might still be found among Mr. Peters’ papers ; and the two gentlemen went off to Barnley to beg Mr. Peters to search thoroughly all his hoards.’

‘Would it be possible, mamma,’ said Agnes, ‘that old Mrs. Norland might have had charge of it, and might have brought it here?’

‘I give you much credit for the thought,’ said her mother ; ‘and it must have been about the time Mrs. Norland came here that the will was made. But she left no papers of any sort, excepting one little box of her own receipts, which Lady Constance and I looked over together, and tore up.’

‘Then old Mrs. Norland was still at the Abbey when Oliver went?’ said Agnes.

‘Yes ; it was on the occasion of her son Fred and his wife, Lady Constance, coming to live at the Abbey that she wisely thought her daughter-in-law ought to be sole mistress in the home that was to be her husband’s ; and, in accordance with her wish, Mr. Norland altered and fitted up this house for her, and here she lived a perfectly happy life during the ten years she inhabited it. So did the party at the Abbey. The absence of Oliver’s ill-temper and wrong behaviour must have been a wonderful relief to the old man. It is a happiness to think that he did not live to witness the return of the wanderer.’

‘But, mamma,’ said Agnes, ‘what will happen if they do not find a will, and if Oliver is really the heir?’

‘I believe,’ said her mother, ‘that Mr. Norland, Lady Constance, and little Constance will be compelled to resign it to him, and to leave the Abbey.’

‘Oh! mamma, is it possible that he would turn them out?’ cried Agnes.

‘I do not know,’ said her mother, ‘that we should blame him for taking what is certainly his own inheritance, unless a will kept it away from him ; and though he might be willing to allow his cousins still to live at the Abbey, I can imagine that Mr. Norland would not choose to be a burden upon his cousin.’

‘Poor Constance!’ cried Georgie ; ‘all her pride in her possessions will be thrown down ; but I shall

be sincerely sorry, and we shall miss her much if she goes away.'

'And I too,' said her mother, 'shall be sincerely sorry ; for I came here in order to be near my dear friend Lady Constance, and I do not care for the neighbourhood of Oliver.'

'Well, mamma,' said Agnes, 'we must hope that yet Mr. Peters or somebody may find the will, as they know that it was made. Why should old Mr. Norland have destroyed it?'

'He might have thought, when no news came of Oliver for so many years, that it was useless, because his nephew Frederic would naturally inherit all. Now, dear children, I have kept you up late to hear all this ; go away to bed ; Georgie can scarcely now keep her eyes open.'

'Will you go up to the Abbey to-morrow morning, mamma,' asked Agnes, 'to ask what success they had at Mr. Peters?'

'No,' said her mother ; 'I think we had better not intrude. Lady Constance knows how anxious I am on the subject, she will let me know if there is any good news.'

During breakfast the next morning, Georgie went perpetually to the window that looked on the road from the Abbey, hoping to see a messenger, but no one appeared, and the two girls went up to their study

as usual. They had scarcely been there half an hour when Georgie exclaimed, 'I am sure I heard Constance's voice,' and she flew down stairs. Mrs. Walton was just taking Constance into the drawing-room.

'Well, is it all right?' cried Georgie. But Constance made no reply; and, throwing herself on the sofa, burst into an agony of tears, which Mrs. Walton could not soothe for a long time.

'Oh!' she sobbed at last, 'it is all gone; we are going to leave the Abbey! That hateful Oliver! why did he ever come back? Mamma only told me about it this morning, and I have been crying ever since.'

'Is it, then, quite decided?' asked Mrs. Walton.

'Quite, that we are to go as soon as possible; I suppose that means as soon as we can pack up our things. Mamma sent me to say she would be glad to see you, if you can go up now.'

'I will go at once,' said Mrs. Walton.

'May not we come with you, mamma,' asked Agnes, 'as far as the Abbey? Of course we will not go in.'

'Had you not better stay here with Constance?' said her mother. 'I think she had better remain with you to-day.'

'Oh no!' cried Constance, starting up; 'I will stay every minute that I can in my dear old home; but come too, Agnes.' So they all set out together. The

park looked unusually lovely ; it was a fresh sunny morning, everything green and flourishing.

‘Is it not too bad,’ Constance began, ‘that this odious man should be able to turn us out of our nice home? I cannot really believe it.’

‘If, dear Constance,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘your Cousin Oliver is the rightful heir to old Mr. Norland, it is natural and proper that he should possess his own. But I cannot think that your father and mother are leaving in such a hurry as you describe. Doubtless they will remain as long as they wish, until they have decided about some other home. You must not blame your cousin, Constance.’

‘But, I assure you, we are going directly,’ she replied ; ‘mamma said that we had very few preparations to make, as we could take nothing away but just our clothes, and desks, and work-boxes.’

‘You will return, Agnes and Georgie,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘when we reach the door, unless Constance likes you to remain in the garden with her.’

‘I think I should,’ said Constance ; ‘it is very dismal to-day in the house. Pray, stay with me, Agnes.’

They left Mrs. Walton to enter the Abbey, and went into the cloister garden ; but there was no game and no merriment to-day ; they walked gravely up and down, conjecturing where Constance’s father and mother would live, and whether Mrs. Walton would

remain at the Lodge, without her friend at the Hall. Mrs. Walton stayed quite an hour in the house, and then she called to Agnes and Georgie. Constance said good-bye to them sorrowfully, and went to her mother.


‘Now, mamma,’ said Georgie, ranging herself by Mrs. Walton’s side as they walked homeward, ‘we are most anxious and curious, pray tell us what is settled.’

‘It appears to be certain,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘that old Mr. Norland must have destroyed that will. Mr. Peters, to whom they went yesterday evening, says that it never was placed in his hands, but that he saw Mr. Norland lock it up in a little leather box. At that time he was inhabiting the library in the old wing of the house ; there were two or three closets in the walls ; but it seems that the box in question used to be kept in the large library table, with deep drawers on each side the desk.’

‘But for all that, mamma,’ said Agnes, ‘did they not search well those old closets?’

‘My dear,’ said her mother, ‘can you suppose that they did not search everywhere? They did look in all the closets in the old part of the house ; they used to be fitted with shelves for books, and the empty shelves alone are there now.’

‘And have they found the little box, mamma,’ said Agnes, ‘with nothing in it?’



‘No, strange to say,’ said her mother, ‘that little leather box is not in the library table, or anywhere to be seen. So, as there is no will, the Abbey belongs to Oliver.’

‘And he is unkind enough,’ cried Georgie, ‘to drive out his cousins, who have lived there so long!’

‘He has behaved in a sharp, angry way about the whole matter, rather appearing to blame his cousin, who was not in the least to blame. So Lady Constance and Mr. Norland do not wish to be his guests, and prefer to leave at once.’

‘And where are they going, mamma?’ asked Georgie, with tears in her eyes.

‘Mr. Norland has a property in the West Indies, which he has never seen, or much attended to; so they mean to go there and try to improve it, and render it of more value.’

‘The West Indies, mamma!’ exclaimed Agnes. ‘Oh, poor Constance, we shall never see her again!’

‘I do not see how that would follow from the fact of her going to the West Indies, and probably coming back in a few years. Certainly I hope often to see her mother again; but as for Constance, you will see more of her than you have yet done, so far from losing sight of her.’

‘Is she not going with them, mamma, then?’ asked Agnes. ‘I shall still more say, poor Constance! for

she will be very unhappy to be left behind. Is she to go to school ?'

'I guess,' exclaimed Georgie, 'she is to stay with us. I see I am right. Mamma, may I not read your face this time ?'

'You are right,' replied her mother. 'Lady Constance thinks reasonably that the climate of Jamaica might be very injurious to so young a girl, and she begged me to take charge of her until they return. So in a few days she will take up her abode with us, and I hope you will help me to make the poor girl as happy as possible ; for we must expect she will be dull and uncomfortable at first, parting with her parents, and then living in so very different a way.'

'We will do our best, mamma,' said Agnes. 'I am so very sorry for her.'

'And so am I, too,' said Georgie. 'I will never tease her again about her pride ; she will have nothing now to be proud of.'

The little party was sitting quietly that evening, not talking much, but with all their thoughts upon their friends' reverse, when a sharp ring at the gate roused and surprised them, and presently Mr. Norland was announced. Georgie sprang forward, expecting to see Constance's father, but as quickly retreated when she saw the dark face of Oliver.

'You expected my cousin, little one, I see,' he said,

‘and you are not so glad to see me. But I am Mr. Norland now, and I hope,’ he continued, holding out his hand to Mrs. Walton, ‘that you mean to be good friends with me, as you were formerly.’

‘I have no reason to be otherwise,’ Mrs. Walton replied. ‘Certainly I am very sorry to lose my dear friend Lady Constance ; but, I assure you, I think it quite right that you should have your own. I hear that your cousins are leaving the Abbey very soon.’

‘Yes, I think Fred is rather touchy about it. I told them they might stay as long as they wished ; but I suppose he does not fancy being guest where he has been master. Besides, he must see about some method of refunding all that he has appropriated for the last five years.’

‘You surely,’ cried Mrs. Walton, ‘do not intend to press that repayment?’

‘I certainly do,’ said Oliver. ‘What right had he to use my income without a certainty that I was dead ? and what reason have I to be tender about Fred ? He robbed me of my uncle’s affection whilst he lived, and of my property when he died. And now that I come and claim my own, every one looks black at me, even those children of yours ;’ and he pointed at Georgie and Agnes. Agnes bent her head over a book, but Georgie looked straight at him with sparkling eyes.

‘You had better go up to the study, my dear girls,’ said Mrs Walton, and they quickly left the room. ‘You cannot be surprised,’ she went on, ‘that every one here should regret your cousin. He has been the best of landlords, and the kindest and pleasantest of neighbours; and you, being a perfect stranger, must expect some time to elapse before you can hold the same place in the esteem of your tenantry and neighbours.’

‘I think I might be welcomed a little more cordially than I have been,’ he repeated. ‘And I hope that you will not think of running off because Constance leaves. In fact, you could not follow them to the West Indies, for there, it seems, they are going.’

‘I have no wish at present,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘to leave this place; it suits me well; and if you accept me as a tenant, I shall remain.’

‘And you and your girls will come to the Abbey, as you have done,’ he said.

‘It cannot be quite the same for my children,’ Mrs. Walton said; ‘for they have gone there with the object of seeing little Constance. Neither shall I have the same inducement; but I shall endeavour to be a good neighbour to you as far as I can. I should feel it unjust to be otherwise.’

‘Well,’ said Oliver, rising to go, ‘I must be content with what I can get, I suppose. Perhaps you

will be at the Abbey to-morrow. I believe they go the day after. Good night.'

A note came early the next morning for Mrs. Walton. Georgie took it into her mother's room, and stood by watching her as she opened it.

'Go away, dear Georgie,' her mother said; 'never watch any one reading a letter. I shall tell you what is right for you to hear about it.' So Georgie went down stairs, and Mrs. Walton soon followed, with her bonnet and shawl already on.

'You are going to the Abbey, mamma?' said Agnes.

'Yes; they go to-morrow; so, very probably, I may stay great part of the day with Lady Constance. Do not expect me back at any particular time; but as Constance will be here to-morrow, you may occupy yourselves in preparing for her the little room next to mine. You know there is a door into it from mine; I will leave that open, so that she may not feel lonely.'

'We will arrange it for her as nicely as possible,' said Agnes. 'Will you not have some breakfast before you go?'

'No; they expect me to breakfast there; so I must hasten.'

The girls spent the day quietly by themselves. The morning was passed in their study at their usual lessons; and in the afternoon they amused themselves in adorning the little bedroom destined for Constance.

‘It is fortunate,’ said Georgie, ‘that this window looks into the road, for Constance would no longer have enjoyed looking over the park, and river, and lake ; and as the road and those cottages did not formerly belong to the Abbey, she will have no regrets in seeing them.’

‘Do you think,’ said Agnes, ‘we had better put a writing-table in here ? She will surely share the study with us for her lessons.’

‘Still, I think I should give her everything in here,’ said Georgie. ‘She has been always by herself, and perhaps will say it disturbs her to be with us talking and reading.’ So they brought a little table, inkstand, writing-case, and bookstand ; ornamented the chimney-piece and dressing-table with flowers, and made it look pretty and comfortable.

‘She had a sofa and an arm-chair in her room at the Abbey,’ said Georgie ; ‘but there is no room for either here.’

‘No ; it cannot be quite the same,’ replied Agnes : ‘and you know her bed and windows were hung with pale blue damask ; but I do not see why she should sleep less well when there is only white dimity. It looks clean, and fresh, and comfortable. I think, Georgie,’ she continued, ‘that although you have teased Constance about her vanity, or respect for riches, that you really do set more value on such

things than I do. I think you have thought her very lucky to be as she was ; but I never saw any reason for her being happier than we are.'

'I did indeed think her lucky,' said Georgie, laughing ; 'and I should certainly be delighted to be myself in such a position ; but you do not think, Agnes, that I would in such a case give myself airs to any other girls who are less well off?'

'I hope not,' replied Agnes ; 'but I dare say we cannot judge how we should feel. At any rate, as you thought more of what she has lost than I did, you must pity her more in proportion. Now, I don't pity her one bit because she will sleep in a small room, simply furnished ; nor because she will eat plain food, instead of having a table covered with luxuries all to herself ; nor because she must now be dressed in clothes as plain as ours ; nor because she will no longer see numbers of gay visitors.'

'Then what do you pity her for,' exclaimed Georgie, 'if for none of those things?'

'For being obliged to leave her father and mother,' said Agnes. 'Whenever either of them die, how much Constance will regret this year or years that she has not been with them!'

'Well, between us both,' said Georgie, 'she will have plenty of pity—more, perhaps, than she will like. I hope she will be nice. I believe I shall like

her very much, now she can no longer look down on us with contempt. Are we to wait tea for mamma ?'

'No; I dare say she will stay quite late. We will have our tea, and then go into the garden till she comes.'

But the evening passed and candle-time came before Mrs. Walton returned. The two girls ran out to the garden door when they heard the bell. Constance was there too. She began to cry when Agnes kissed her; and Mrs. Walton said—

'I hope that you have made Constance's room quite ready for her; she will go to bed directly.' Then she took her upstairs, and stayed with her till she was in bed.

'Now, dear mamma,' said Georgie, when she came down again, 'please let us stay up a little longer with you, and tell us what you have been doing all this day long.'

'I have been doing a variety of things,' Mrs. Walton said. 'I have helped Lady Constance to select and pack up what was really her own. I have been talking over plans with our Mr. Norland, and trying to console him; for, as you may suppose, he is sadly grieved, for his wife's sake, at this great reverse; and then I tried to keep Oliver quiet. He has not rubbed off any of his asperities by his long contact with the roughest of worlds—that of a colony; but I really think his irritable, tiresome temper is worse than it used to be.'

‘Then, mamma,’ said Agnes, ‘I think Mr. Norland is right to go away at once. If Oliver had been pleasant and kind about it, how different it would have been ! But is there really nothing that belongs to Constance’s father ? Will he be very poor indeed ?’

‘He has Lady Constance’s own small income, and the sugar estate, which lately has been worth nothing, and may still be worth nothing, or may prove tolerable with care. But with respect to the Abbey, he is infinitely worse off than had Oliver returned during his uncle’s life ; for they feel certain that the old man would never have left Fred without anything. And now Oliver most selfishly and unreasonably insists upon the restoration of the whole income during the five years his cousin has been in possession. I tell you all this, dear children, partly that you may observe how such a disposition as Oliver’s punishes itself. He does not see one friendly face to welcome him to his own place ; and he is driving away his nearest relations by the harsh and unfeeling manner in which he asserted his rights.’

‘It is terrible, mamma,’ said Agnes ; ‘it must be terrible to him to feel that he has no one to love him. And poor Constance, has she come for good to-night ? Will she not return to the Abbey at all ?’

‘No ; her father and mother took leave of her to-

night. They start early to-morrow, and will not even use one of Oliver's carriages. They sent for two flies from Barnley ; and he did not offer one of the carts for their luggage. I shall send Joseph up with the pony carriage in the morning to bring down the three or four boxes which are packed with Constance's own things. I told Mr. Norland, as we must now call Oliver, that I should take all that I thought really belonged to the child, and he made no reply at all. So I went to her room and took all her clothes and a quantity of ornaments and trinkets which she told me had been given her by her mother's friends and relations, and the same thing in her schoolroom.'

'And, mamma,' said Georgie, 'do Mr. Norland and Lady Constance go soon to Jamaica?'

'Immediately ; they go to Plymouth to-morrow, and will join the Southampton steamer, which will touch there in a day or two.'

'I can scarcely believe it all, mamma,' said Agnes. 'Only a few days since, do you remember, when we started for Fern Valley with Constance, how happy we all were? and all this has come to pass since ! Constance actually established here !'

'Yes,' returned her mother, 'it has been very sudden and very painful. I have had so fatiguing a day that I shall trust Constance to you very much to-morrow ; and now let us go to rest.'



CHAPTER IV.

Constance's First Morning at the Lodge—The Departure from the Abbey—Constance tries to reconcile herself to her new Abode.



CONSTANCE'S first day in her new home was not a very happy one to any of the party. Mrs. Walton was laid up with a bad headache, and lay on the sofa in her own room. Constance had refused to get up when Agnes went to her in the morning, saying she did not care for anything in the world, and might as well stay in bed as get up. She scarcely touched the breakfast that Agnes brought her, saying : 'Why do you carry up this tray? Have you no maid at all?' Agnes replied that her mamma had only one maid, and that she and Georgie did everything for themselves, and many little things about the house. 'But,' she went on, 'you need not do the same, Constance. I will do everything for you that you do not like to do for yourself; and I will help you to dress now, if you like to get up. You know there is a nice little bath-

room close to your door, and warm and cold water come in there, so that we never have any trouble about tubs and carrying water. We go to the bath by turns, and you can do the same. Shall I come and show you how to fill it, and how to let the water off when you have finished with it ?

‘Not now,’ said Constance. ‘I don’t feel as if I could stir. Oh dear ! I suppose mamma and papa are just starting. Can you see the west road from any of your windows ?’

‘Yes, we can see a good piece of it from Susan’s room upstairs. Would you like to come there, and watch them go ? I can wrap you up in shawls, without your dressing.’

‘Oh ! I could not bear to see them go,’ exclaimed Constance, bursting into tears ; ‘but I should like to know when they are gone. Will you go and look ?’

Agnes left the room, and went up to Susan’s. There she found Georgie stationed at the window.

‘I am watching the road,’ she said. ‘I want to see poor Mr. Norland and Lady Constance go. Oh ! there they are. Look, Agnes ! A fly, and the Barnley carrier’s cart with their boxes ! Oh ! just fancy their not having the use of a carriage even ! Now they are out of sight. Oh ! how sorry I am !’ and Georgie began to cry.

‘I must go and tell Constance,’ Agnes said ; ‘she

will feel more unhappy still, now that they are actually gone.'

'Well?' said Constance, as Agnes came again into her room.

'I found Georgie up there watching for them,' said Agnes, 'and we saw them pass. They must just now be going through the Lodge.'

'Really gone!' sobbed poor Constance; 'gone for years, and left me behind! Oh! how miserable, how very miserable I am!' And she wept so violently that Agnes felt frightened, and went to her mother, saying she did not know what to do with Constance.

'Take her some of this sal-volatile,' Mrs. Walton said. 'Put half a teaspoonful into the wine glass of water, and say I sent it to her, and that I beg she will try to calm herself, before I come to see her. I am too unwell just now to sit up, but I will come as soon as I can. Then leave her by herself for a time, dear Agnes. It is a great trial for her, poor girl!'

Agnes took the glass, and persuaded Constance to drink it; told her what her mother said, and then went down to Georgie.

'That is right, Agnes,' cried Georgie; 'I am glad you are come. It is wretched sitting here at breakfast all by myself; and it is quite cold too! Mamma would not have hers, and I could not eat all by myself.'

‘I will ask Susan to warm the coffee again for us,’ said Agnes ; ‘and here are the rolls that she made this morning on purpose for Constance. You had better eat one.’

‘And all her cherries too,’ exclaimed Georgie, ‘that I took the trouble to gather for her this morning ! Our pains to please her have been wasted this morning !’

‘We must try again to-morrow,’ said Agnes. ‘I cannot wonder at her. Perhaps she will rouse up a little when her things come, and help us to arrange them. Is Joseph gone for them ?’

‘He is gone, and come back again,’ said Georgie. ‘I saw him start when I was gathering the cherries, and he said he must get Constance’s boxes before her father and mother started, or perhaps he would not get them at all. So you see in what estimation the servants hold Mr. Oliver. And every one at the Abbey is going to leave him !’

‘You know, Georgie,’ said Agnes, ‘mamma does not like us to listen to gossip from the servants.’

‘No ; and I did not talk to Joseph myself about it,’ said Georgie ; ‘but I heard him say to Susan, when he came into the yard with the things, “Every one of the Abbey servants have given notice to quit yesterday, as soon as they found Mr. Fred was leaving.”’

‘And where are Constance’s things ?’ asked Agnes.

‘They are in the coach-house,’ said Georgie. ‘You know Joseph cannot take them upstairs till Constance is up; and perhaps some must go in the study. I thought they had better wait till mamma could tell us about them.’

‘I will go presently,’ said Agnes, ‘and tell Constance they are come. And I do not know how you feel, Georgie, but I really could not attend to my lessons to-day. I shall not try. I will stay between mamma and Constance. And what will you do?’

‘First,’ said Georgie, ‘I will order the dinner. If we had been alone, we should only have had cold beef and salad; but I suppose Constance would not like that. Had Susan better get a chicken to-day?’

‘Yes,’ replied Agnes. ‘I do not know whether mamma means to make any difference while Constance is here; but to-day, especially, as she has eaten no breakfast, I dare say we shall be right to order a little more dinner.’

Georgie was very fond of seeing to the kitchen affairs; and Mrs. Walton accustomed both girls to order their simple supplies now and then, so that, in case of her own illness or absence, there would be no difficulty in keeping the little household right. So, when Agnes returned to Constance, Georgie went to consult with Susan, sent Joseph to buy a fowl from

the adjoining farm, and went herself to gather peas, and currants for a tart.

‘Now, Susan,’ she cried, as she came in with her basket, ‘if you will make a custard pudding as well as a currant tart, and a good salad, I think Constance will not grumble; at any rate, that is the best dinner I can think of to-day. You will roast the fowl, Susan, and make some bread-sauce. I dare say mamma will be up by one o’clock.’

Agnes did not make much progress in cheering Constance. She did not wish to see any of her things, she said; they only reminded her of her home; and as for her pretty clothes, she should never wear them again.

‘Why, Constance,’ asked Agnes, ‘what do you then intend to wear?’

‘I suppose,’ replied she, ‘that I must have strong cotton prints like yours. I never had such a thing yet in my life.’

‘As you already have abundance of summer frocks,’ said Agnes, ‘I do not see where would be the use of buying others. It will be best to wear out those you have first, for another year they will be too small and useless.’

‘But I have a great many evening frocks,’ said Constance, half crying. ‘I can never wear those again.’

‘Why not?’ returned Agnes. ‘You will not cer-

tainly have to be present at evening parties at the Abbey ; but Georgie and I sometimes go to a party. We went last month to a children's croquet party at the Rectory, and there was dancing in the evening. You did not go because you had a bad throat, do you remember ?'

'Yes, I do, because I wondered what you and Georgie would go in.'

'We went, of course,' said Agnes, laughing, 'in one of our white frocks and white Garibaldi's ; but you would have gone in one of your prettiest muslins ; and should such a thing happen again, you have them to wear.'

'Ah! but I shall never have any wish, or any spirits to go anywhere now,' sighed Constance.

'I think, if I were you,' said Agnes, 'I should consider very much of what my mamma would wish me to do while she is away. You cannot suppose that she would like you to be utterly miserable, and do nothing, and go nowhere all the time she is away?'

'Of course,' said Constance, 'she wishes me to be happy and well, and to improve in everything ; but I don't feel as if I could ever study any more, and I believe I am going to be ill now, for I feel quite sick and giddy.'

'That is really,' said Agnes, 'because you have been so long without eating, and have cried so much.

I do not wonder that you feel ill. Now, pray do as I ask you ; get up and dress, and then you will be able to eat your dinner, and you will feel better. I will go and make you a nice warm bath. Will you promise to get up ?' Just then Mrs. Walton came in, hearing what Agnes said.

'I am so glad you are better, dear mamma,' cried Agnes. 'I am just going to get ready the bath for Constance.'

'I am glad to hear it,' replied her mother. 'You must rouse yourself, my dear girl, and try to bear your trouble bravely. Just now, you have nothing more difficult before you than to dress and come down to dinner. Agnes will stay and help you. Constance managed to get up, and to come down just as Susan was taking dinner into the tiny parlour.'

'I hope,' said Georgie, 'that you and mamma, the two invalids, will like my dinner—I mean my ordering.'

'Your ordering !' said Constance ; 'have you ever anything to do with ordering ?'

'Certainly,' replied Georgie, laughing ; 'is it such a wonderful thing ? Agnes and I often order the dinner and everything in the kitchen for a week at a time. Once, when mamma was very ill, Agnes ordered everything for a whole month, and looked every week over the books, to be sure that they were properly put down.'

‘Then do you go into the kitchen and the larder, asked Constance, ‘and tell Susan what to do? I should not have the least idea what to say about anything. I never remember going into the kitchen at home. Oh! but it is no longer my home;’ and tears began to flow.

‘Don’t think of it just now,’ said Agnes hastily. ‘How do you like Georgie’s chicken?’

‘I like it,’ said Constance; ‘all chickens are much the same, I think. Why do you not eat it?’

‘I should only have had cold beef,’ returned Agnes, ‘if you had not been here; so I may as well eat it now. That is a little treat for you and mamma, because you were not well, and both had bad breakfasts this morning.’

‘You see, dear Constance,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘Georgie thought it necessary to pet you a little to-day. When you are a little reconciled to the change in everything, you will, I doubt not, live happily in the same way, exactly as Agnes and Georgie.’ Constance sighed as she thought of the large handsome dining-room at the Abbey, compared with the very small space in which there was just room for the table and the four chairs.

‘I wonder,’ she said, ‘that papa should have made so tiny a room as this, or that old Mr. Norland should have made it!’

‘You know,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘that this Lodge was originally a cottage, with only five rooms on the ground floor ; and I have heard your mother say that when your grandmother was consulted about the alteration here, she preferred having one of the rooms as a hall, instead of joining two together for a larger dining-room, because, she said, she cared more for her drawing-room and a pretty entrance, than for a dining-room where she only spent a few minutes every day.’

‘Then two rooms were put together, mamma,’ said Georgie, ‘to make our drawing-room, and the fifth was and still is the kitchen. And was all the top, the upper floor, put on then ?’

‘Yes, that was added, and the staircase was built out at the back. It was a very fair-sized house, Constance, for one old lady ; and I hope you think the drawing-room is pretty.’

‘It was a nice house for her,’ said Constance, ‘if she had not before lived at the Abbey ; but I think she must have felt it uncomfortably small after that great spacious house,—I do.’

‘You will soon get accustomed to it,’ said Agnes. ‘We are perfectly happy and comfortable here ; so it cannot be impossible for another girl to be so also.’

‘Do you think,’ asked Constance, ‘that papa will be able to improve that sugar estate till he becomes a rich man again ?’

‘Dear Constance,’ replied Mrs. Walton, ‘try not to think of ever being rich again ; it is a complete uncertainty whether your father will find the estate good or bad. It will be wiser for you to turn your whole attention to improving yourself in all ways, so that, if your parents return poor, you will be a help and a comfort to them. And if they should return rich, you will be none the less calculated to be an ornament to society. Think of this, dear girl, and do not waste your energy in vain regrets.’

‘I think,’ said Constance, gravely, ‘that I shall try to do as you say ; but I wish I was not close in sight of the Abbey. Whenever I look at it, I know I shall feel vexed and miserable at my own change, and I shall hate Oliver.’

‘Let us hope that a little time will soften both these feelings,’ said Mrs. Walton. ‘And now, what do you say to unpacking and arranging the things that Joseph brought down this morning ? later in the day we will take a drive. You must manage, Georgie, to spare Constance one or two shelves, and a closet in your study.’ On either side of the fireplace in the study were two cupboards with silk doors, having between them a set of bookshelves ; one side was appropriated to each girl.

‘About the cupboards. Yes, mamma,’ said Georgie ; ‘for one of mine is nearly empty. But about the

bookshelves, I don't know, mine are squeezed as full as possible already ; but do you know there is a spare set of little shelves in the coach-house ? Will you let me clean up those and find a place for them upstairs ?'

'They could stand,' said Agnes, 'on the oak table against the wall, where we put our desks.'

'Well, then, Georgie shall arrange that,' said her mother ; 'and you, Agnes, shall help Constance to put away her clothes. I observe, Georgie, that whenever anything is wanted, you are generally able to produce it out of that wonderful coach-house.'

'You know, mamma,' said Georgie, 'that many odd things of Mrs. Norland's were left here, which were put out of our way when we came, and I have already appropriated some. I like rummaging among them. This very set of bookshelves, Constance, is not really ours ; you may claim it as your own, for it was your grandmother's. Now I will go and get it.'

There was every possible convenience in the little room allotted to Constance : a little hanging wardrobe, though only made of coloured calico on a slight wooden frame ; two pretty little ottomans which served instead of chairs, and opening, made a nice place for hats, jackets, and cloaks ; a neat and high chest of drawers, with hooks at each end for hanging parasols and umbrellas, and upon this a pretty little cupboard for shoes and boots.

‘I could not have believed,’ said Constance, when all her clothes were unpacked and put away, ‘that all my things would have gone so nicely into this little room. Do you remember what a quantity of drawers and cupboards and things I had in my room at home? In fact, I had so many places for things that I never could find anything! If I can keep my clothes as they are now, I do not see why I cannot be quite comfortable here.’

‘I am sure I do not,’ said Agnes, laughing. ‘Why should they not stay as they are now?’

‘You know,’ said Constance, gravely, ‘I had a maid to do everything for me, and to put all my things away and keep them tidy. I don’t know how I shall manage it myself.’

‘If you never could find your own things,’ said Agnes, ‘I think it was more tiresome than convenient to have the maid. Why cannot you put away your own clothes in their places when you have done with them? We always do; nobody touches our things.’

‘If I had always been used to do so,’ said Constance, ‘most likely I should not have found it difficult. Of course custom must have much to do with those kind of habits.’

‘Yes, I am sure it has,’ returned Agnes; ‘and I am sorry that you have to alter your customs so much.’

I will help you willingly till you feel it quite easy to do for yourself.'

Georgie, on her part, had dragged the old set of shelves out of the coach-house ; had coaxed Susan to give them a good cleaning, and to help her to take them up to the study. There she had mounted them on the oak table, unpacked all Constance's books, and arranged them neatly in the shelves, with her desk on the table, beside those belonging to herself and Agnes. One or two work-boxes in the same trunk she had taken into the drawing-room.

'Now, dear mamma,' she cried, 'Agnes has had the boxes of clothes all to herself in Constance's room, and I have taken out all the books ; but there is still a box full of something ; shall I unpack it?'

'I think,' said her mother, 'you had better leave that for another day ; it contains some china ornaments, and several pretty things that probably Constance will see to herself.'

'There she comes, then,' said Georgie. 'Will you come and undo your own box of pretty things, Constance? or shall I bring them in here to you, one by one?'

'I do not know what things you mean,' replied Constance. 'All my clothes are done, and I see you have put all my books in a nice little shelf upstairs ; and there are my two work-boxes. What else is come?'

‘I packed a box,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘with the flower-vases on your schoolroom chimney-piece, and the little clock, with two or three other ornaments, and a set of chess men, and an inkstand, and so on. Your mother told me all those things were your own. Would you like to have them out, and place them here, or shall they remain packed?’

‘Oh, have them out,’ cried Georgie; ‘ornament us a little bit. Say I may fetch them, Constance; you need not stir yourself.’

‘Very well,’ said Constance, leaning back on the sofa. ‘I am quite tired; you may unpack them if you like.’

‘Come, Agnes,’ said Georgie; ‘come and help me.’

The two girls went into the coach-house, and soon returned, bringing a pretty little clock, and a group of stuffed humming-birds under a glass shade.

‘Oh, my dear little birds!’ exclaimed Constance; ‘but I almost think I would rather not have them here. They only remind me that I have no longer a home.’

‘Was not that group of birds your mamma’s present to you on your last birthday?’ asked Mrs. Walton.

‘Yes,’ Constance replied; ‘and the clock was from papa on the same birthday.’

‘Then,’ returned Mrs. Walton, ‘you should look upon them as recollections of your parents’ kindness to you; the clock especially, as a hint to you to lose

no time, but to improve fast. As for these delicate little birds, you may imagine that Lady Constance will remember them when she sees the living creatures darting about amongst the flowers, where she will soon be.'

'Do the humming-birds indeed live wild in Jamaica?' asked Constance. 'Well, I shall like to look at these, then. What else is there, Agnes?'

'There are two blue flower-vases, and two very pretty cornucopias for flowers.'

'Ah! yes; my old nurse gave me the blue ones when she went away to be married. I was very fond of her, though papa said she spoilt me sadly, and it was very well she was going. And my aunt sent me the cornucopias, and said she hoped they would always be full of flowers from my own garden. But, you see, now I have no garden.'

'Of course you can have a piece of ours, if you like,' said Agnes, as she went to fetch the vases.

'That hope of your aunt's,' said Mrs. Walton, 'only meant that she wished you to be industrious, and fond of the healthy amusement of gardening. That you can certainly do here; so we hope that the cornucopias will still be full.'

'They were always full at the Abbey,' said Constance, half smiling; 'but not with flowers reared by me. They are very pretty, are they not?' she continued, as Agnes placed them on the table.

‘They can stand on the writing-table, mamma,’ said Agnes, ‘and the birds on the chiffonière. The clock might be in our study, Constance, as there is already one here, or in your own bedroom, and the blue vases on the chimney-piece.’ And away she went again.

‘This is all,’ cried Georgie, coming in with her arms full, and depositing the load beside Constance on the sofa.

‘My chess-board and men ; they are very handsome,’ said Constance. ‘Did you ever look at them?’ and she undid the box in which the pieces were wrapped in cotton.

‘Oh ! look at the little elephants,’ cried Georgie, ‘with the things on their backs !—“howdahs,” I remember that curious name ; and the beautiful little knights in armour.’

‘They are very beautiful,’ said her mother. ‘Have you learnt the game, Constance?’

‘Oh no. Papa said I must learn to play with him when he gave me these ; but I have never even tried.’

‘Well, you must learn, and be able to beat him when he returns.’

‘And that microscope is not very useful to me,’ said Constance, ‘because I never can manage to put it together. I like so much to look at bits of things when papa puts it up for me ; but I forget to ask him,

and I have never looked at anything for a long time.'

'I will show you how to do it,' said Mrs. Walton ; 'and you shall try to mount some little objects for yourself. We will keep it down stairs, please, Constance. What is that larger box?'

'My paint-box ; it is almost new, and I have not begun to paint or draw at all. Was there not a portfolio with it?' asked Constance. 'Perhaps it did not come.'

'Yes,' said Agnes, entering with the portfolio in her hand. 'Joseph was just shutting up the box to take it to the loft when I saw this lying at the bottom ; it just fitted. Is there anything in it? may we look?'

It contained six pretty water-colour sketches of peasant haymakers, children, and country scenes, several small landscapes, and a series of studies of trees. With these were two blocks and a quantity of paper.

'My Uncle Hugh, mamma's eldest brother, sent me these, and the paint-box. He has several children, and they all draw and paint beautifully ; so he supposes I can too ; but I have not tried much. I wished to begin copying some of those figures ; but my governess said I must first practise outlines for a long time, and I do not care much for that.'

'Perhaps you will like it better in company with

others,' said Mrs. Walton. 'Now, do you feel disposed for tea? and then we will drive.'

'Tea already!' cried Constance. 'How short the afternoon has seemed!'

'It is because you have been busy unpacking and arranging things with Agnes,' said Georgie. 'I suppose we must do as usual to-morrow, mamma? We have been quite unsettled yesterday and to-day.'

'We shall soon return to our old routine,' said her mother; 'and it is by far the happiest life to have a regular system of occupation.'

They drove that evening in the opposite direction to the Abbey. The following day Mrs. Walton had some shopping to do in the little town of Barnley. When this was mentioned in the morning, Constance said she would rather not go. She was sure that all the people in Barnley would be staring at her, and pitying her. 'Besides,' she said, 'your best way is through the park; and I could not bear to see it—to see the house, even at a distance.'

'Well, dear Constance,' said Mrs. Walton, 'I shall not urge it at present; but I hope in a little while you will be able to bear it. So one of the girls will stay with you to-day.'

'I will, if you please, mamma,' said Agnes. 'I am going to arrange a garden for Constance, and she will work hard with me all the time you are away.'



CHAPTER V.

Constance studies with Agnes and Georgie—She carefully avoids her Cousin Oliver—Oliver takes possession of the Abbey, but decides to let it—The New Tenants.

THE next day was Sunday. Mrs. Walton saw at breakfast that Constance was doubting whether she should go to church, so she said—

‘It will be sad for you, dear Constance, to see no one in your mamma and papa’s place at church; but you know it must come next Sunday if not this, for you cannot altogether give up going to church. Make up your mind to bear it bravely. You know they will think of you to-day at church with us, in our little seat.’

So Constance went up to prepare with the other two girls.

‘Put on some thick shoes,’ said Agnes; ‘for it rained hard last night, and will be wet in the field-path.’

‘Are you then going to walk?’ asked Constance.

‘We always walk to church,’ replied Agnes. ‘It is

not much more than a mile ; and mamma likes Joseph to go too.'

It was a pleasant walk to the church ; but Constance could not enjoy it. She thought of the previous week, when she had driven with her mother, and not a shadow of their terrible reverse had yet fallen upon them. At the porch they met the rector's wife, and Constance drew back ; but Mrs. Brand had been an intimate friend of her mother's, and she would not be avoided.

'Come, dear Constance,' she said ; 'do you think I am not glad to see you ? You must come often, and always tell me when you receive news from your dear mother. We will talk a little more after church.'

Constance felt a little cheered ; for she had discerned nothing less courteous than usual in Mrs. Brand's manner. 'She neither looks down upon me nor pities me,' she thought. 'If every one were so, I should not feel it so bitterly.' But when seated beside Mrs. Walton, she could not but observe that many eyes were directed upon her. The congregation of the little church, with the exception of one or two families, consisted of the farmers' wives, daughters, and labourers, with a few of the Barnley people, who found it a pleasant walk in the summer to come to the village of Norland, instead of the town church. And now Constance recognised so many of the faces she

had seen in the Barnley shops, that she thought they really must have come to stare at her, and at the new owner of the Abbey. Some of the eyes, she thought, expressed amused contempt, some intense pity ; and Constance's heart rebelled against this last demonstration. She had not dared to look towards her father's accustomed seat. That which Mrs. Walton occupied was in the aisle, and the Abbey seat was in the body of the church ; so, without turning her head, she did not see it. During the sermon, she just glanced towards it, expecting to see Oliver's black head and scowling face in the place of her own kind, gentle-looking father. But no one was there ; the seat was totally empty ; and she felt glad that if her own parents did not occupy it, no one else should.

As they left the church Mrs. Brand joined them, and said she would walk a little way. Mrs. Walton asked her if she had seen Mr Norland.

'No,' she replied ; ' I suppose he waits for my husband to call ; and he will do so, of course. I scarcely expected to see him at church to-day. Do you remember that his non-attendance formerly was one great cause of dispute between him and his uncle ? But I am glad,' she said, turning to Constance, ' that we have one of our dear family still among us. I do not feel as if they were quite gone whilst I see you, Constance. And I am glad, too, to see you so well

bestowed, with my pet Agnes for a companion and help.'

'Do not leave me out, pray,' cried Georgie. 'Am I not a good companion too?'

'Good in some ways,' returned Mrs. Brand; 'but I will not say you are equal to Agnes. However, in many respects, perhaps, you are just now as good for Constance.'

'Why do you say "just now?"' asked Constance.

'Because,' replied Mrs. Brand, 'you will want rousing and cheering, and Georgie's noise and nonsense will perhaps do it more effectually than Agnes's quiet ways.'

'I shall never be merry and happy again myself,' said Constance, 'whatever my companions may be.'

'I am sorry to hear that,' said Mrs. Brand; 'what can be the cause of such a determination? Not surely the loss of riches? But I shall leave Agnes to argue that, and merely ask you, do you intend to increase the trouble of your parents as much as possible?'

'Oh, Mrs. Brand!' exclaimed Constance; 'what a question!'

'It is quite a simple one, however. Will it be pleasant to your mother to hear that you never smile or talk, that you are unhappy and dull? Try to think of them more than yourself, little friend. And come

soon to see me, to spend a long day. Persuade your mother, Agnes, some day this week. Make your appearance any day immediately after breakfast, and I shall be delighted to see you.'

Constance gradually fell into the habits of Agnes and Georgie. She found that no one pitied her, except for the fact of her being separated from her father and mother; and she saw that Mrs. Walton, Mrs. Brand, and some others, esteemed persons according to their own personal merits, and not according to their riches. She became more active and self-reliant. Mrs. Walton expected as much from her as from the others. And she found that she could do what they did if she tried. In her studies she found that Agnes and Georgie had learned more thoroughly than she had, although they were much left to themselves, and she had always had a governess at her elbow. She expressed this with some surprise to Mrs. Walton.

'You name the very thing,' said Mrs. Walton, 'that has caused the difference. You had Miss Ross beside you; and if you found a sentence difficult, perhaps she told you what it meant, and you perhaps soon forgot it. And if you made mistakes in your translation, she showed you what was wrong, and sometimes corrected it for you. But I never correct for Agnes and Georgie. I mark what is wrong, and

they must work at it till they get it right. And their translations in the same way : they must try and try to make out the sense ; and I do not help them till they have tried hard. Other people cannot learn for you, dear Constance : there is no *rich* road to knowledge.'

So Constance sat in the little study with the two girls, and had never used her dictionary and grammar so much. She soon found she was gaining, and began to like the plan. 'But your history,' she said to Georgie ; 'I see you read it to yourself. Have you nothing more to do about it?'

'Nothing but to read it and recollect it,' said Georgie. 'Mamma tells me to read certain chapters during the week ; and then whenever she asks me about it, she expects that I know pretty well what I have read. If I don't, she tells me to read the same chapters over again. Perhaps she does not ask me for a long time, and perhaps the very day I have read it.'

'Well,' said Constance, 'I do believe I learn more in this way than when I had Miss Ross : having to do it all for myself makes me think more about it. But oh, Georgie ! there is one thing that was quite forgotten when papa and mamma went—the little piano in the breakfast-room. Don't you remember? I always called it mine ; and all my music was left there too, you know. Mamma had given me all her

handsome music books, and they had her own name on them before she married.'

Georgie told this to her mother ; and Mrs. Walton said, that certainly the books could not be claimed by Mr. Norland.

'About the piano,' she said, 'I do not feel so sure ; but I will ask Mr. Norland about it the next time I see him. If he does not call shortly, I will go to the Abbey to see him.'

Mr. Norland had once or twice gone to the Lodge. Constance, on hearing his voice, had escaped through the window, and declared that nothing should ever induce her to see him, the cause of all their misfortunes, and the man who had ruined her dear father, and driven him from his home.

'I am sorry, Constance,' said Mrs. Walton, 'that you still feel so much dislike to your cousin, at least for the reasons that you give. Do you not love justice ?'

'Yes, certainly ; but every one knew that my uncle loved my father and did not love Oliver, and that he actually made a will, leaving the Abbey to my father. So I think it was most unjust to turn him out.'

'Put yourself and your parents in the place of Oliver,' said Mrs. Walton. 'Suppose that your father was the lawful heir, and that your uncle had always favoured a younger cousin. Then, that you

returned from abroad after many years, and found the younger cousin in possession of what really was your own. What would you have wished done ?

‘Why, certainly I should have wished the cousin to give up to my father ; but, Mrs. Walton, you see people know that my uncle did leave it to my father.’

‘He might have done so,’ returned Mrs. Walton ; ‘yet no one can claim it without having the will to show. Suppose that your father, having been the absent one, was told that a will had once been made in favour of the younger cousin, would he not have said, “Show me the will that leaves it away from me, and I submit at once ?” But if such a document could nowhere be found ?’

‘Oh, dear !’ cried Constance ; ‘I suppose it is really Oliver’s ; but if he was not unjust, he surely was very unkind. Mrs. Walton, only think, in two or three days only after they received him so nicely, to have turned them quite out—at least, having behaved so disgracefully that they could not stay !’

‘I can say nothing for him, I think, on that score,’ said Mrs. Walton. ‘But I can quite imagine that your father, feeling that he has actually no right to be there, would, in any case, have hurried away from the place.’

‘Yes, I think I should have felt like that too,’ replied Constance ; ‘but, at any rate, Oliver never tried

to make them feel it less—was not affectionate or kind. Oh ! I do think he is abominable.'

'I should like you to speak of him in a more forgiving spirit, Constance,' said Mrs. Walton. 'I fear that he has experienced a good deal of coldness from most of his neighbours. For the sake of all the poor people on the estate, I wish it were otherwise.'

'I am sure, mamma,' said Agnes, 'they will all miss Lady Constance sadly.'

'Yes,' rejoined her mother ; 'I wish that Oliver could feel happy, and at home, and begin to take on himself the duties of a country gentleman. But he will not, as long as he finds himself not met warmly by any of his neighbours. It has been an unhappy affair for all sides : unhappy for Mr. Norland and Lady Constance ; unhappy for all the tenants ; certainly unhappy for Oliver himself.'

'And unhappy for me too !' cried Constance ; 'surely you think that ?'

'In being separated from your parents, I do think so,' said Mrs. Walton. 'I think it otherwise very good for you to be here, living like Agnes and Georgie, with nothing to recommend you to any one's notice excepting your own qualities of mind, manner, and disposition.'

'Oh, but it was so pleasant,' said Constance, 'to have everything one wanted directly, and to see

people always so pleased to see papa, and thinking so much of him.'

'That, you may observe, was not entirely on account of his wealth ; otherwise,' said Mrs. Walton, 'his cousin would now receive the same marks of respect and affection. Your father will always be loved, rich or poor ; and I trust you will be the same. Will you go with me this afternoon to call at the Abbey ?'

Constance hesitated.

'I have never been near it,' she said, 'since that miserable day. I do not think I can go yet.'

'I should like to go, mamma,' said Georgie.

'You can both come,' said their mother. 'Constance is now enough at home not to mind being left alone sometimes ; so let us start.'

'It seems such a very long time, mamma,' exclaimed Georgie, 'since we last walked down with you from the Abbey. I shall feel quite odd if we are let in, now that it belongs to that cross-looking man.'

She had, however, no chance of trying how it would feel, as they were told Mr. Norland was out.

'Let us take a little turn in the cloister garden,' said Agnes ; 'the poor ruin will look more solitary than ever.'

It did indeed look solitary ; the walks and beds had no longer the well-cared-for appearance that they used to wear.

‘Has Mr. Norland no gardener, I wonder?’ said Georgie. ‘I would not have believed so short a time could have made such a difference.’

‘Whether there is a gardener or not,’ said her mother, ‘if the owner takes no pride in the place, it is sure to be neglected. And poor Lady Constance was so fond of this cloister garden! It makes me quite sad to see it now. Come, let us go towards home.’

‘I think, altogether, mamma,’ said Agnes, ‘that Constance is tolerably happy with us.’

‘She would be an ungrateful girl,’ cried Georgie, ‘if she were not; for you pet her so much, and do so much for her.’

‘No, indeed,’ returned Agnes; ‘by degrees I am leaving off doing anything for her; and in her lessons she very soon preferred being left to herself. I am very sorry for her. I am sure she feels the change even more than she says. Do you expect letters soon, mamma, from Lady Constance?’

‘We cannot reasonably do so yet,’ replied her mother, ‘unless their vessel might meet one bound for home, and write by it. In another month or six weeks we may look for a letter.’

‘I hope it will be a good account,’ said Georgie, ‘and that there is a chance of its turning out quite a rich place. That news would cheer up Constance wonderfully.’

‘She will cheer up soon, I trust,’ returned her mother, ‘without news of coming riches ; and our first letter will bring no news but that of their arrival. It will take some months before Mr. Norland will be able to know much about the success of his expedition.’

‘Then we must have patience still,’ said Georgie, as they entered the house.

‘Constance,’ she called, ‘where are you ? Are you tired of being alone ? Oh ! I do believe you have never stirred off that sofa all the time we have been out.’

‘No ; I have stayed here,’ said Constance ; ‘and I tried to read, but I kept thinking of how you would find the house and the drawing-room. Are you not going to tell me anything about it, Georgie ?’

‘I have very little to tell,’ replied Georgie. ‘Mr. Norland was out, so we did not go in ; but we went into the cloister garden for a little while, and we thought it looked untidy and desolate, and we soon came away.’

Tears stood in Constance’s eyes.

‘Our dear old garden !’ she said. ‘How fond mamma was of that bit of the grounds ! Did you go anywhere else ?’

‘Nowhere else,’ said Agnes. ‘You know Mr. Norland is scarcely settled there yet, and has had all new servants. Very likely in a little while it will be better attended to.’

‘I do not think I should like that any better,’ said Constance. ‘Then it would seem that no one cared for mamma’s absence, since everything looked as well without her. But if things are neglected, it feels wretched too.’

‘Then the best way is,’ said Agnes, ‘not to think about the Abbey. Just now here is tea to think about.’

In the evening Mr. Norland called. Constance had just curled herself up in the corner of the sofa with some new embroidery work.

‘Pray, remain where you are,’ said Mrs. Walton to her. ‘I would rather you did not run away whenever Mr. Norland appears.’

Constance coloured up, but kept her place; and after Mr. Norland had spoken to Mrs. Walton and her daughters, he turned to Constance, and seated himself beside her. ‘So, my little cousin,’ he said, ‘you are quite a stranger to me. How is it I have never seen you at any of the times I have been here? I suspect you are not too fond of the sight of me.’

‘Constance,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘has very naturally been much grieved at parting with her mother and father; and, under all circumstances, you cannot wonder that she is not *very* glad to see you.’

‘I do not know who is,’ said Mr. Norland sharply.

‘I get nothing but cold looks from every one ; so much so that I intend to put up with it no longer. I prefer the free life of Australia a thousand times.’

Constance started up. ‘Oh!’ she cried ; ‘do you mean to go back again?’

‘I do, young lady,’ he replied ; ‘but not to give up my rights here. I shall let the house and grounds,’ he said, in answer to Mrs Walton’s inquiring look, ‘and put the estate in the hands of an agent. I have already sent to the offices in London to let it as fast as possible.’

‘If such is really your intention,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘could you not have let it to your cousin, and so he might still have remained here?’

‘Do you suppose,’ returned Mr. Norland, ‘that Fred can afford a rent of several hundreds a year, and that he also has the income to live in such a house?’

‘No,’ returned Mrs. Walton ; ‘excuse me for so foolish a question. I know he has not the means. So we shall lose the Norlands entirely, and have strangers in the old Abbey!’

‘You will like them as well as you like me, I should think ; but you will perhaps see me every year or two. Probably I shall go to America this time, and come over now and then to see how things progress. I shall put a sharp agent over them, and

I will have no shirking of rents as Fred allowed. And now, having given my news, I will say good-night.'

'Good-night,' said Mrs. Walton. 'Allow me to say that I much regret your determination, and wish sincerely that you could have remained and have felt happy here.'

'Well, I have not been happy,' he replied. 'I have a sort of affection for the old place, but I feel like a fish out of water, and have lived a scrambling life too long to be at ease among civilised people.'

There was quite a silence when he was gone. Constance began to cry. 'It is too bad,' she sobbed; 'he will neither live here himself nor let papa live here.'

'You are sorry, mamma,' said Agnes; 'but will it not be better even to have strangers here, who may do their best, and perhaps be liked, than this surly man, whom no one would ever like?'

'Yes, dear Agnes, it may be so; but I do grieve to see a place that has been inhabited by its real owners for hundreds of years turned over to strange hands, especially when there are two of the family who might live there. I must say I would rather even that Oliver should have remained.'

'Now, mamma,' cried Georgie, 'pray don't say you regret him; I am sure I do not. I hope a nice merry

family will take it, with several young daughters. That would brighten us all up a little.'

'I shall not wish to know them,' said Constance. 'I never wish to enter that house again, unless my own papa were there.'

'Perhaps Mr. Norland will change his mind again,' said Agnes. 'Come now, Constance, it is getting very late.'

Several days passed, when Mrs. Brand came to call.

'I have news for you,' she said; 'for Constance especially. I saw Mr. Norland this morning: we have tried our best to lead him to be sociable and to feel at home, but it seems he is moped to death here, and he has let the place.'

'Actually let it!' cried Georgie; 'and to whom?'

'To a very rich manufacturer from some large town in the north,' she replied. 'That is all I have been told. In fact, Mr. Norland knew nothing else himself; he let it through an estate office in London. I said, "I hope you are giving us a gentleman for a neighbour;" and he replied, "I know nothing of him but that he can pay his rent. And certainly I should not consult the tastes of my neighbours as to my tenant. They have not deserved that attention from me."'

'And when do they come?' asked Mrs. Walton.

'Next week, I understand. He would not say

when he meant to leave himself, and I expect will go off some morning without a word to any one.'

They saw nothing of Mr. Norland for some days; and one morning Georgie burst into the room where her mother, sister, and Constance were seated at breakfast, with—

'Oh, mamma! he is gone; Mr. Norland is gone! Joseph was in the village, and he saw him pass in the dog-cart, with the light cart behind with all his luggage; and the man who drove the luggage told Joseph he was going to Southampton to embark in some ship.'

'Sit down, my dear,' said Mrs Walton. 'I dare say Joseph's news is true; but it makes me very sad thus to see one after another go away from his home. Next, I suppose, we shall hear of new-comers.'

'Will you call on them, whoever they are, mamma?' said Georgie.

'I do not know,' said her mother. 'I do not yet like to think about them. There will be time enough when we hear they are come.'

'If they are manufacturers,' said Constance, 'they are, I suppose, very vulgar people. I should not think you would know them, Mrs Walton.'

'But I do not think it follows at all, dear Constance,' said Mrs. Walton, 'that they are to be vulgar, because they are, or have been, manufacturers. Pray,

try to put that prejudice away from you. We shall take these new-comers as we find them ; and should their manners and habits be what are termed vulgar, do not let us forget that a great deal of good may lie hidden under a bad manner. Do not judge them hastily, whatever they may be.'

The three girls could not help feeling much curiosity on the score of the new-comers. It so happened that they were all driving with Mrs. Walton along the road to the nearest station, when they met the well-known close carriage from the Abbey, followed by a phaeton, conveying the new family to their abode. Constance turned away her head as they passed the phaeton.

'My dear mamma's favourite carriage,' she said, as tears started to her eyes ; 'I cannot bear to see it occupied and used by other people. So he has even left the carriages and everything for the use of these people !'

'But not your horse, Constance, not any of the horses ; they were all sold before he went away, if that is any comfort to you.'

'Yes, it really is,' replied Constance. 'I would rather they were sold quite away, than to be constantly seeing them here.'

'Dear mamma,' said Georgie, 'I know you will say I had no business to stare at them, but I could not

help seeing that there was a girl in the carriage, quite a young girl, and two other ladies and a gentleman. Now, Agnes, please say that you saw them too.'

'I did see a girl,' said Agnes, laughing; 'she was looking out of the window on our side. And two more gentlemen and some servants were in the phaeton.'

'Then, Georgie,' said her mother, 'as you have seen for yourself precisely who is arrived, there is no occasion for you to consult Joseph on the subject. Though I have nothing at all to say against Joseph, I wish you were a little less fond of gossiping with him.'

'I will not gossip with him any more, dear mamma,' cried Georgie; 'but you will go and call on the lady who is just come to the Abbey, will you not?'

'I shall probably go in about the course of a week, but I shall not be in a hurry to fly there the moment they are arrived; so exercise your patience.'





CHAPTER VI.

Georgie, Constance, and the New-comers—Constance is affronted and vexed that her Father's Home is let to Manufacturers—Agnes goes with her Mother to the Abbey—Her Description of Nellie—Mrs. Ashby calls with her Daughter—Constance's Prejudice.

HOW quiet you are, Agnes!' exclaimed Georgie, as they sat at their lessons in the little study; 'you can go on just as quietly as if nothing out of the way had happened. I have been watching you for the last five minutes exactly, by Constance's little clock, and you were evidently thinking of nothing but that bit of Schiller. While, on the contrary—'

'You cannot fix your attention for two minutes on your exercise,' said Agnes, laughing. 'It is only the difference in our natures. You are easily excited, and are fond of new things; I do not care for new things.'

'But Constance too is not attentive this morning,'

said Georgie ; ' she has taken three or four new pens, and she has first tried a French book, and then a German book, and after all has done nothing.'

' I can make allowance for Constance,' said Agnes, stroking her long flaxen hair ; ' I know that she is thinking, " These vulgar new people are now in my dear mamma's drawing-room, using her piano and her books, and sitting in her low chair, while she is on the rough sea in a confined ship." I do not wonder that her mind should wander from study ; but you, Georgie, are downright idle. You have no excuse for inattention.'

' None,' said Georgie, laughing. ' I confess that I have none, excepting that I am in a fever of curiosity to see that girl.'

' And I,' said Constance, ' have a perfect dread of seeing her. She will be put in possession of my room ; and I tell you, Georgie, if you make friends with her, and go there to visit her, I decidedly will not go too. I could not bear it. I should not have cared half so much if they had been a good family, well-born people ; but I cannot endure that traders should be put in our place.' And Constance's eyes filled with indignant tears.

' Dear Constance,' said Agnes, ' do not let them come into your head at all. You may be quite sure that if they are unpleasant people, mamma will do no

more than just call ; and if they are what we like, it will be much more agreeable to have them there than Mr. Oliver Norland. I am afraid both you and Georgie are building up a scrape for yourselves, by allowing your heads to run so much upon these people. I do not know what mamma will say at the end of the week. I believe you have scarcely done anything, either of you.'

'Indeed,' said Constance, 'I feel quite ashamed that I have suffered the very thought even of such people to disturb me so much. I will think of them no more. I will work hard the rest of the week, to make up for lost time.'

'That is wise,' said Agnes. 'Will not you, Georgie, do the same?'

'I will try to work to-morrow,' replied Georgie. 'I really cannot to-day. We are going after dinner to call on Mrs. Brand ; and as doubtless Mr. Brand has been to call at the Abbey, we shall hear something about them.'

They went to call at several houses ; and had a long and pretty drive. The three girls generally stayed in the pony carriage whilst Mrs. Walton paid her visit ; but at Mrs. Brand's they were allowed to go in also. The clergyman had no children ; but he and Mrs. Brand were extremely fond of Agnes and Georgie. Constance had not been so much there ; but Mrs.

Brand tried now to make her feel as much at ease as the other two.

‘You may go into the garden if you like, children,’ she said, ‘whilst I talk with your mother. There are some beautiful new geraniums in the greenhouse, and a new little Alderney cow in the paddock.’

Georgie was off in an instant, and the other two followed more leisurely. They found plenty to amuse them for half an hour, and then they returned to the house.

‘It is a dear little cow,’ cried Georgie. ‘I so much wish we had a paddock, and could keep just such a little beauty! Will you come to see it, mamma?’

‘Not to-day,’ said her mother. ‘I have one more call to make, and must start.’

‘But before we go,’ exclaimed Georgie, ‘pray tell us, Mrs. Brand, whether you have yet seen the family at the Abbey. Yes, I see you have!’

‘Is my face so tell-tale?’ said Mrs. Brand, laughing. ‘Yes, I have seen them. I went with my husband to call on his new parishioners, as in duty bound.’

‘Well?’ said Georgie.

‘Well, I saw Mrs. Ashby, Mr. Ashby, an aunt, whose name I did not catch, two young Mr. Ashbys, and Miss Ashby. Now, are you satisfied?’

‘No, not in the least; you have told us nothing about them. Do, please, wait a moment, mamma.’

Is Miss Ashby about as old as we are? Is she pretty? and are they all vulgar?’

‘I can answer none of those questions,’ replied Mrs. Brand, laughing. ‘I do not know how old she is; I did not notice whether she is pretty; and I never should give an opinion upon such a matter as vulgarity. I will leave you to decide yourself, and to judge for yourself. Have you no questions, Agnes and Constance?’

‘I never wish to hear a word about them,’ said Constance, ‘and never will see them, if I can help it.’

‘And I, as you say,’ replied Agnes, ‘think we had better judge for ourselves whether we like them or not.’

‘Remember,’ said Mrs. Brand, as she stood at the porch, seeing them mount the little pony carriage, ‘that I shall expect a full and precise account of these terrible neighbours of yours; so, whenever the girls have seen them, Mrs. Walton, please send them here to tea with me.’

‘And I will answer your questions better than you answered mine,’ cried Georgie, as they drove out of the gate.

A few days after this, as the little party at the Lodge were sitting at dinner, Mrs. Walton said—

‘My dear Georgie, you must not be sadly disappointed to-day. I have settled to go this afternoon

and call upon Mrs. Ashby; but as she is quite a stranger, I do not intend to take you all in. Agnes will go with me, and you must wait for the next call. I think I need scarcely ask Constance whether she cares to go and sit in the pony carriage at the door. So choose, Georgie, whether you will stay at home with Constance, or drive with us to the Abbey.'

'I am doubting, mamma,' said Georgie. 'I think I should like to go; but when we got there, and you and Agnes went in, I should be quite vexed to be left outside; so, altogether, I think I will be polite enough to stay with you, Constance.'

'Thank you,' said Constance; 'I shall value your company much, knowing that you only stay because you may not go.'

'And recollect, Agnes,' cried Georgie, 'that you will pay for your luck in going the first, by being perfectly worried with questions when you return. And, please, look well at everybody. I shall expect the most minute account.'

Agnes drove away, looking very quiet under the threatened storm of queries that awaited her return; and Mrs. Walton gave the two girls an occupation that kept them at work most part of the afternoon. This was thoroughly setting in order the little conservatory that adjoined one window of the drawing-room. They had to move out all the flower-pots, then

to sweep the shelves, to clear out all dead leaves and dust from the passion flowers that covered the house wall, and then to water well the plants as they stood upon the lawn, and to replace them neatly in the conservatory. They were surprised to find how late it was before they had accomplished all this ; and just as Georgie was carrying away the broom and the watering-pot, they heard the pony carriage stop at the gate. Joseph had been sent on some commission to Barnley, and had not returned ; so Georgie took the pony round to the stable, and began unfastening the harness.

‘ Shall I help you Miss ? ’ said Susan, coming out from the kitchen.

‘ No, no, Susan ! ’ said Georgie ; ‘ I can put him in the stall quite well ; you go away to your own work. Besides, you see, I have Constance to help me. Here, Constance, take the whip and the cushion into the saddle room.’

‘ I will do that,’ replied Constance ; ‘ but I cannot touch the pony when he is out of the carriage. I am afraid of his biting or kicking.’

‘ Well, you need not come near,’ said Georgie, who was leading the pony into the stable. ‘ I shall soon have done.’

Constance stood at a respectful distance, watching Georgie whilst she took off the collar and put the soft halter over the pony’s head.

‘I could not do that,’ she said. ‘How do you know that when his head is all loose, and untied, he will not rush away and do all sorts of mischief? Why did you ever try to do these things?’

‘When we first had a pony, at our old home,’ said Georgie, ‘Joseph was away for nearly a year staying with his mother, who at last died. And during that time we only had a boy, morning and evening, to do up the stable, and clean “Sultan.” So we were obliged, if we used him at all, to harness and unharness for ourselves.’

‘Can Agnes do so too?’ asked Constance.

‘Oh yes! She can catch him out of the field much better than I can; because “Sultan” always thinks I mean to play, and scampers about, and he comes at once to Agnes. Now I will hang up this harness on its proper nails, and then we will go and hear Agnes’s news.’

‘Now, dear mamma!’ she cried, as she ran into the drawing-room; ‘I have been a model of patience. Constance and I have made the conservatory perfectly beautiful; and we have unharnessed and put by “Sultan;” so we deserve to hear something. Come, Agnes; tell.’

‘We went in, of course,’ said Agnes, smiling, ‘and everything looks just as it used to do. Do not go, Constance; pray, come and sit by me.’

‘I do not like to hear about my poor old home, thank you,’ said Constance. ‘I will go up-stairs.’

‘Nonsense !’ exclaimed Georgie, catching her ; ‘you cannot go on like that for ever : make a beginning to-day, and hear what Agnes has to tell us about these new people. Suppose that they should remain here for some years, how can you help hearing about them, and seeing them ?’ She pulled her down on the sofa beside her, saying, ‘Now go on, Agnes.’

‘Well,’ said her sister, ‘we were shown into the drawing-room, and there we found Mrs. Ashby. She is a very short and fat woman, extremely good-natured-looking, and very kind in her manner. There was nothing particular about her dress ; she sent for her daughter, saying she supposed she was about the same age as me.’

‘But, Agnes, did you think her very vulgar ?’ said Georgie.

‘I scarcely know,’ said Agnes, ‘how to explain what there is about her : not quite like our mamma, or like Lady Constance, or Mrs. Brand. She has, too, rather an odd way of pronouncing words ; but her countenance is so pleasant, that I do not think any one would think about her except as a very kind person.’

‘Then, about the girl,’ said Georgie.

‘She came in with her aunt, who is tall and thin ; I

did not very particularly notice her, because I wanted to take in all about Miss Ashby. First of all, she is your age exactly, but larger a good deal, and plump ; her face is round and rosy, and her mouth very good-natured ; not in the least pretty, except that she has splendid teeth.'

'And her hair, and her dress, Agnes ?' said Georgie.

'Her hair is not pretty, it is brown ; rather rough and curly, or frizzly ; she had a blue ribbon tied round it rather untidily ; but Mrs. Ashby said she had been busy unpacking her father's books, and was not indeed fit to be seen. She had a mohair dress, of black and white stripes ; and is not certainly a very lady-like girl. But she speaks nicely. And I liked her countenance very much. She asked if we walked about much, and said she had heard that Mr. Frederic Norland's daughter was staying with us ; but I do not think, Constance, she knew any of the circumstances about your leaving the Abbey. I should think she is straightforward and sincere, from her face.'

'In short, do you fancy her much, Agnes ?' urged Georgie. 'No, I see you do not.'

'You know,' said Agnes, 'that I do not take violent fancies all at once to new people ; and the truth is, that I do not very much fancy any of the party. At the same time I feel they are good, and worthy of being liked. I do not mind saying so to you,

Georgie, because I know you will not be in the least swayed by my fancy either way ; and are just as likely to fall into ecstasies over Miss Nellie as if I had not said “ I don’t fancy them ; ” whilst Constance is determined to avoid the subject entirely.’

Constance had taken a book, and appeared to be immersed in its contents.

‘ Come, Constance,’ said Georgie, pulling the book from her hands, ‘ don’t pretend to be reading ; I know you have been swallowing every word that Agnes has said. Do talk a little. If Mrs. Ashby and Nellie come here to call, you must really stay and see them. I have not made up my mind, from Agnes’s description, whether I shall detest them or love them, and you must help me to decide. There is mamma listening to all our discussion, and never saying a word to help us.’

‘ I wished to hear Agnes’s account,’ said Mrs. Walton ; ‘ and can only remark upon it, that I think it was very just. I need surely not say that I shall expect every politeness and kindness to be shown to Miss Ashby, should she seek your companionship. I thought her manner simple and unpretending ; and you, Constance, try to remember that the Ashby family are in no way answerable for any of your Cousin Oliver’s doings. They hear a certain house is to be let, and become its tenants, knowing nothing of the private history of its former possessors.’

‘So that it would be unjust in the extreme,’ cried Georgie, ‘to hate them for the sake of their landlord.’

Constance kept to her determination of working hard, and making up for lost time, and seemed to feel rather ashamed of her bitter feelings towards the unoffending family of Ashby. She came with flying colours through her Saturday examination ; whilst Georgie’s usual spirits sank to a very low ebb, as she saw page after page of her translation scratched across, to be written again, and page after page of her reading marked to be read again.

‘This is terrible, Georgie !’ said her mother ; ‘really I cannot discover that you have paid attention to one subject during the last week. Constance is passing you quickly ; another such week, and I must notice it by debarring you from all drives and amusements.’

‘Dear mamma,’ cried Georgie, ‘I will not be so foolish any more. I will try to be as steady as Constance ; and I will not let my thoughts run at all where they have been running lately.’

So, on Monday morning, the three girls worked equally well, and came down to dinner, satisfied with their own progress. In the afternoon Constance had her hour’s practice on the piano, and she was in the midst of minor scales, when Georgie came behind her, and whispered ‘Nellie,’ at the same time holding her down by both shoulders, until the visitors

were actually in the room. Constance knew that Mrs. Walton would not suffer her to run away then, so she had no resource but to take a chair and resign herself. She scarcely looked up in answer to Mrs. Ashby's salutation, when Mrs. Walton named her ; and stooping over a book on the sofa table, she listened in silence. In reply to Georgie's question of how she liked the Abbey, Nellie said she was delighted with it, especially the ruin and the flower garden adjoining it. And that desolate-looking old wing, she went on, I have not been into it yet, but I shall not be content till I have rummaged every corner. Do you know the inside of that part of the house ?

'No,' said Georgie, 'we have never been into it ; at least we do not remember it. Constance does not recollect its being inhabited by her grandfather.'

Nellie turned towards Constance, and began to say something ; but seeing her abstracted aspect, she half-whispered to Georgie, 'Is it long since Miss Norland lived at the Abbey ?'

'No,' said Georgie ; 'she only left it about six weeks or a month since, I forget exactly.'

'Oh ! Then is she daughter of our landlord ?' asked Nellie. 'We understood she was his cousin.'

'So she is,' replied Georgie. 'I will tell you all about her some day ;' for she saw that Constance

heard their whispering, and was colouring painfully. 'Would you like to come and look at our tiny garden?' And she took her out through the conservatory.

'What a charming little retired garden!' exclaimed Nellie. 'I think I should enjoy and like a place so small, better almost than the beautiful garden at the Abbey.'

'This is very nice,' said Georgie; 'but sometimes in summer too much shut in with the trees. The summer-house is pleasant and cool.' This looked over a sunk fence into the park.

'I will gather some cherries,' said Georgie, 'if you like them, and we will sit here and eat them.'

When in about half an hour Agnes came to look for them, she found them with their heads close together in the most intimate fashion, and the cherry-basket empty between them. 'Mrs. Ashby is going,' said Agnes, 'and I came to fetch you.'

'Thank you,' replied Nellie. 'I hope you will let me come often to see you. I shall be rather lonely at the Abbey; for mamma says I am too young to go out with her much, and till we came here I used to go to a day-school every day. But here I am not obliged to do anything.'

'We shall be very glad to see you,' said Agnes, 'any afternoon; for we are busy in the study all the morning.'

‘I have been telling her about Constance,’ said Georgie; ‘for I thought she would wonder why Constance should be so grave, and so shy of her. And now she understands all about her.’

‘Yes; and I am so sorry for her!’ exclaimed Nellie. ‘I can quite believe that she must hate the sight of me, installed in all her own old haunts; though of course I cannot help it. I see mamma is waiting, so good-bye,’ she said, as they entered the drawing-room, and they were soon gone. Constance drew a deep sigh as the door closed.

‘Oh, what a long visit!’ she exclaimed. ‘How patient you are, Mrs. Walton, to sit there talking to that odious fat woman, and answering all her questions! And, Georgie, I never was more thankful to you than for taking that girl out of the room. Did you ever see anything so rude as her way of asking questions about me—just before my face. And what a great, coarse vulgar thing she is!’

‘Gently, dear Constance,’ said Mrs. Walton; ‘I do not quite like setting to work to abuse our visitors the moment they have left us. Let us take a little time before deciding that they are odious and vulgar and rude. I do not say that Mrs. Ashby’s appearance is particularly prepossessing; but you must not measure Miss Ashby by yourself, or by Georgie and Agnes. I believe they are both small for their age; and you

yourself are unusually slight. She is a large stout girl ; but that fact need not make her vulgar. Try not to be prejudiced, dear Constance.'

'She seemed so very sorry for you,' cried Georgie, 'when I told her how you came to be here.'

'You told her !' exclaimed Constance. 'You need not have done so ; and I do not want her to be sorry for me. I do not like to be pitied by people like that.'

'But, Constance,' said Agnes, 'it was much better she should know all about you. I dare say we shall often see her ; for she says she is very lonely at the Abbey, and asked if she might come here sometimes. It would be very ill-natured in us to refuse her ; so try to bear her presence without feeling disturbed ; and she will not expect you to talk to her. I really think she seems kind-hearted and very unassuming.'

In a day or two a note came from Miss Ashby. It was addressed to Agnes, and begged that she and her sister would spend the following day with her, as her father, mother, and aunt were all going to a friend's house at a distance. It ended with—'I do not know whether I may venture to ask Miss Norland to join you ; but if she will come, I shall be so glad to show her how well I am taking care of her garden, and all her things.'

'Oh, the horrid girl !' cried Constance. 'Fancy her taking possession of my dear little garden ! I

wish she would leave it to be overrun by nettles and weeds. I would much rather than that she should do anything in it.'

'It is not likely,' said Mrs. Walton, 'that the garden you called yours should be left in disorder. Does not the breakfast-room look into it? So, for their own sakes, it would be kept nice. And, indeed, that little sentence of Nellie's seemed to me rather pretty. But I will not ask you to go, Constance. You will be my companion that day. Answer the note, Agnes, and say you will go.'

'And the day after, mamma,' said Georgie, 'we shall have to go to tea with Mrs. Brand, that we may tell her our impressions of the Ashby family.'

'I do not forget that you are to do so,' said her mother.





CHAPTER VII.

The Sisters visit Nellie—She takes them into the old Wing of the Abbey—Conjectures about the Lost Will—Nellie shows them her Sketches—Agnes is astonished at her Skill—They take her to the Waterfall, and find she is not accustomed to Country activity.

AFTER a busy morning, Agnes and Georgie prepared to set out for the Abbey. Constance almost smiled when Georgie said—

‘Now, Agnes, it is time to dress. Ah! I know what you are thinking, Constance. Very likely Nellie will wonder, too, at our very plain dress, for she wore such a handsome silk frock the day she came here. But I begin to like our never-failing white, for it gives us nothing to think about; and when I say I must dress, I mean chiefly making my hair nice, and having clean stockings and shoes.’

‘That, indeed, is necessary now,’ said Constance, looking at Georgie’s feet, which bore unmistakeable signs of the kitchen garden.

‘Ah! I have been all amongst the strawberry beds

this morning,' said Georgie, 'and the ground was wet. What will you do, Constance, all this afternoon?'

'I believe Mrs. Walton is going to drive to Barnley, and she asked if I would go with her.'

'Then good-bye till evening,' cried Georgie; and the two sisters were soon ready and went away. Nellie met them at the door, and greeted them very warmly.

'I was watching for you from the library window,' she said. 'Mamma set out an hour ago, and I felt so very lonely in this great house, that I am quite delighted to see some one. I cannot bear being alone, unless I am very eager indeed about some new employment.'

'If it had been evening, instead of morning,' said Georgie, laughing, 'I should say, Are you afraid of ghosts, that you so dislike being alone?'

'And I should say,' returned Nellie, '"Not a bit;" for I am afraid of nothing. Certainly, if any one were inclined to be superstitious, this is just the place to indulge in fancies.'

'Can you really think so?' said Agnes, looking round the luxurious drawing-room. 'I should have thought this house the last in the world to encourage anything gloomy; all is light and bright and pretty.'

'Here,' said Nellie. 'Oh, yes; but I meant among the ruins, and still more in that deserted old wing, neither ruin nor inhabited abode. What do you say

to going in there this afternoon? You said you had never been in the old part.'

'I should like excessively to go there,' cried Georgie; 'but we have tried the doors many times, and they are locked.'

'Yes; but I know where the keys are,' said Nellie. 'Come now to dinner, and then we will have an exploring expedition.'

Agnes could not help thinking of the last time she had been in the dining-room: Lady Constance looking harassed and pale, Constance's father grave and thoughtful, and Oliver striding up and down the room.

'You have often been here, of course,' said Nellie, as they seated themselves.

'Oh yes,' replied Agnes; 'we were here a day or two before Constance's father and mother left the Abbey; and except that you are now sitting where Lady Constance sat, and that there were two gentlemen in the room besides us, everything is exactly the same, even that little silver mug that Constance always used.'

'A very sad change I think you must find it,' said Nellie, colouring; 'how you must regret them!'

'I do regret them,' said Agnes, 'for I was very fond of Lady Constance and of Mr. Norland. You must not think I am rude to you to say so.'

'No, no!' cried Nellie; 'I am not going to be

affronted where no affront is meant ; and I hope, in time, Constance will be able to bear the sight of me, and will make friends. I shall take great care of everything that seems to have belonged to her.'

The room was rather profusely decorated with flowers.

'I see,' said Agnes, 'that one of Lady Constance's tastes is come to you with the house. She always had a quantity of flowers about the rooms.'

'I am glad that I have something like her,' said Nellie. 'Is not that picture in the breakfast-room a likeness of her? She must have been very beautiful. Your story about them, Georgie, has made me feel as if we had no business to be here ; and I am sorry, for I like and admire the place so much. Do you know that Mr Norland asked if papa would like to buy the Abbey? and papa said he would rather rent it for a few years first, to see if he liked it.'

'I wonder,' said Georgie, rather pettishly, 'that he could think of selling a place that has belonged to all his ancestors.'

'So do I, rather,' replied Nellie ; 'but I should be delighted if it were really our own. Shall we go out now? Come with me first to get the keys of the old wing.'

Nellie led them through the library to an inner study, where stood the library table, the reading chair and desk that old Mr. Norland had used, and where

all his favourite books had been placed. Agnes and Georgie had only once before peeped into the room, when Constance had been sent with a message to her father; and having looked upon it as a sort of sanctuary, they felt a little startled to see Nellie drag out one drawer after another in the old-fashioned table.

‘Why!’ exclaimed Nellie, ‘the keys used to be in this little drawer; papa must have moved them.’ So she pulled out several more; and at last seized upon a dingy-looking bunch of keys.

‘I feel sure,’ said Nellie, ‘that there are some secret drawers in that old table. I mean to have such a rummage all over it some day.’

‘Does your papa like you to touch his table and his things?’ asked Agnes; for she knew that Constance had never been allowed to enter the library or her father’s study uninvited.

‘Oh!’ replied Nellie, ‘I do whatever I like with papa and all his things; he is the most good-natured old man that ever was. I call him “Old Man” for a pet name; but he is not really at all old. Come, now, let us see whatever we can find worth seeing.’

The sisters followed her to the little door that Constance had pointed out as the one her grandfather used; and Nellie applied a key which opened it at once. They entered a vestibule, gloomy and dusty: at either side a door admitted them into rooms which

had apparently been drawing-room and dining-room, and a cross passage at the back of the dining-room led into a large long room lined with bookshelves. They peeped into the front rooms, and then went to the library.

‘This, then,’ said Agnes, ‘is the old library that Mr. Norland was so unwilling to quit for the new one; but it is a good-sized room. Constance spoke of it as being very small.’

‘Perhaps she meant one of these turrets,’ said Nellie. ‘They are small, but might be very snug indeed when all furnished. It seems a pity that these rooms should be never again of any use. I almost wonder the new part was ever built.’

‘This would have been very small,’ said Georgie. ‘You see there are only these three tolerable rooms, and a very small one behind the drawing-room; and I suppose just the same up-stairs.’

‘Well, I suppose you are right,’ said Nellie. ‘This library must have looked well enough when full of books. What are those little doors at intervals between the bookcases?’ They were locked; but Nellie discovered a small key on her bunch which opened them all three.

‘It is just a small closet fitted with drawers and shelves,’ said Nellie, entering the first. ‘Look if the others are the same.’

There were many torn papers, half backs of books, and odd volumes lying about in these closets, though the outer room had been cleared of all such debris.

‘It was in here,’ exclaimed Nellie, ‘that old Mr. Norland lived when he made that lost will. What if it still were tumbling about among some of this rubbish? I wonder if they searched thoroughly for it?’

‘Of course they did,’ replied Agnes; ‘it was much too important a loss to be carelessly borne. Lady Constance and Mr. Norland spent one or two days in ransacking every place. Besides, it was known that old Mr. Norland kept papers of importance in the drawers of that library table where you found these keys, or else in a little box that used to stand on the table.’

‘I feel sure there must be secret drawers in that table,’ cried Nellie. ‘I wonder did Mr. Frederic Norland know of any?’

‘Surely, I should think,’ said Agnes. ‘He had been almost all his life with his uncle, and knew all his ways.’

‘But he did not know what he had done with his will,’ cried Nellie, nodding her head. ‘I call it very mysterious indeed. If I were Constance, I think I should be for ever rummaging about trying to find that scrap of paper.’

‘Lady Constance and Mr. Norland quite made

up their minds that it was destroyed,' said Agnes. 'I fear there is no doubt of it. Let us look at the drawing-room again.'

'Some one or other took pains once upon a time to make this room pretty,' cried Georgie. 'Look at the painted ceiling—Cupids and goddesses I suppose they were, when not hidden by dust ; and the white panels edged with gold, and the curious old mantelpiece.'

'I dare say girls like ourselves once took pleasure in dressing up this room with flowers,' said Nellie, 'just as I do now in the new drawing-room. It makes one quite sad to think they are all gone and dead. Come, let us go up the stairs.'

She and Georgie raced up the stairs and into the bedrooms. They were over each sitting-room, and contained nothing remarkable.

'After all,' said Nellie, 'there is nothing very romantic to be found in this old place: no strange trap-doors, no pictures without names, no stained floors. I think I like the ruin better ; shall we go there ?'

'Willingly,' said Agnes. 'I am very fond of the ruin ; and if you will allow me, some day I should like to go on with a sketch I began of the refectory door, or rather archway. It is the first sketch from nature I have tried.'

'I began a sketch,' said Nellie, 'of that very same

archway, so we might go on together. Pray, come whenever you wish. Shall I run for my sketch, and we will compare it with the real place?' Away she went, leaving the two sisters in the flower garden.

'She is very good-natured,' said Agnes, as they looked after her, 'and very frank and sociable.'

'Yes, all that,' said Georgie, laughing. 'Pray, go on; find some more nice things to say. I feel we ought to like her, and I know you think as I do. What a pity it is that she talks so loud and so broad, and moves about in such an awkward way, so that her elbows always seem to come first, and that her hands are so large and so red, and that she wears those odious yellow earrings, and—'


'Hush,' said Agnes, 'here she comes.'

Nellie brought two or three sketches. 'I did these in the mornings before breakfast,' she said. 'The ruin looks lovely then. I have begun to colour one.'

Agnes took them from her hand, expecting to see something very rough or childish.

'These your doing!' she exclaimed. 'They are beautiful. I can do nothing at all like this. I must come to you for instruction. I should like to sit by you and watch you.'

'Do you think they are good?' said Nellie. 'I had a dozen lessons the last quarter I was at school; but I did not feel as if I learned much from the master.'



He only gave us copies ; and I should have liked to go out in the woods and have had a lesson from a live tree.'

'I do not think you will find any master about here,' said Agnes. 'Mamma does water-colour sketches very well. She has just begun to teach me a little. You might learn something from her, perhaps.'

'Indeed,' exclaimed Georgie, leaning over Agnes's shoulder, as she sat on a stone bench with the sketches spread out on her knee, 'I do not think mamma's look a bit better than these. I wish I could make a tree like that. You beat me completely, Nellie, in the matter of drawing. I shall begin to be dreadfully jealous if you leave me behind in other things also.'

'Most likely,' returned Nellie. 'I know nothing as well as you ; for being at school is terribly idle work. I can imagine that girls at home, taught by their own mammas, would learn infinitely more than in a crowd, where no one cares if you progress or not. My mamma never liked teaching, so I have been always at school ; and I declare that all I do know I picked up by myself in the holidays.'

'Ah!' said Agnes, 'mamma always says people must teach themselves if they want to learn ; and she makes us teach ourselves, only looks at what we have done now and then. But surely you would learn

some things better with a master—Italian and German, for instance.’

‘Not at all,’ replied Nellie ; ‘most of the girls at school had both, and I doubt if there were two among them who could carry on a dialogue in either language, or understand a book easily. I certainly could not, until papa wrote to me, saying “You have now learnt German for a year or more, I shall expect you to be able to talk with me when you come home.” Then I worked very hard by myself, in the play hours, and learnt all the phrase books thoroughly.’

‘Then your papa understands German well?’ asked Georgie.

‘Yes,’ said Nellie, ‘he understands five or six languages. Now I should like to take a walk somewhere, for I have been about the park very little. Of course you know it well ; show me a pretty part.’

‘I think,’ said Georgie, ‘the prettiest spot in the park is the little waterfall ; will you come and see it ? It is about a mile down the deer park, behind the house.’

‘I should like extremely to go there,’ said Nellie. ‘Would it make a good sketch ? I will lend you a block and pencils, Agnes, if you like to try.’

‘Yes, indeed I should,’ said Agnes. So they returned to the house, where Nellie produced her stores of paper, pencils, blocks, colours, and so on.

‘Why, you have a perfect shop!’ cried Georgie. ‘Two or three paint-boxes even, and all such handsome ones; and all those blocks; and a drawer quite full of pencils: you will never use them all.’

‘Papa gave me a good supply when we came out here; he said that most likely we should not find these things good at Barnley. There is a new block for you, Agnes, and take what pencils you like.’

‘Thank you,’ said Agnes; ‘I can take the leaf off, when I have sketched the fall.’

‘I’ll give you the block,’ said Nellie; ‘pray keep it.’

‘I have one,’ said Agnes. ‘Perhaps mamma would be better pleased if I did not take it; but you are very kind.’

‘No,’ returned Nellie; ‘unluckily it is no credit to me to give anything away, because I have more of everything than I want. I sometimes think I should like to have to practise a little self-denial. Now we have all we want, unless Georgie likes to draw too.’

‘No, thank you,’ Georgie replied, laughing. ‘I will not have my drawings compared with yours. I will run about, and talk to you whilst you draw.’

The walk through the deer park was very pleasant; there were some very venerable thorns there, and a great many beautiful trees.

‘This is charming,’ cried Nellie; ‘how I shall improve in tree-painting! I shall bring out a table, and

regularly work at these trees till I have a good sketch of each. You had better join me, Agnes.'

'I could, sometimes in the afternoon or evening,' said Agnes; 'but I cannot in the morning, when, as you say, everything looks best.'

'Then I will have two sets of sketches,' said Nellie, 'morning and evening; and as the lights and shades are totally different, it will be very interesting to do the same tree in a variety of colours. Is this the little stream that forms the waterfall?'

'Yes,' Georgie replied; 'this valley narrows into a dell, and then into what I call a large crack, and the stream at last almost fills it. There is just room for us to scramble down at one side of the fall you will see soon.'

As Georgie said, they were soon in a narrow ravine, the rocky damp sides of which made it deliciously cool. After a hundred yards of this, the little rivulet fell down a rock of about twenty feet high, and then continued its course till the ravine gradually widened, and the sides softened down into the valley.

'I hope you are a good scrambler,' said Georgie; 'for getting down by the side of the fall is rather rough. We brought Constance once, and we could not persuade her to go down, so we had to go back the same way.'

'Indeed, I am very awkward,' said Nellie; 'but I

do not mean to return without seeing the fall, and making my sketch. I dare say you will help me. What ! are we to get down there ?'

They were now at the top of the fall ; and Agnes was already scrambling down the rough stones, which at either side were wet with the spray of the foam.

' You must step carefully from one stone to another, and take hold of some of the roots and ferns that grow in the chinks of the rock. It is quite easy ; I will go just before you and place your feet.'

' Well, I will try,' said Nellie ; ' but it is just like going down the side of a house, with a waterfall to deafen you into the bargain. Stop ! I cannot carry my block and my bag, I shall want both my hands.'

' I will take them,' said Georgie ; and she slipped her handkerchief through the loop at the top of the block, and through the strings of the bag, and tied it round her waist.

' There,' she said, ' they will both hang at my back, and not be in my way in the least. Now reach your foot down to this stone, and hold by the root of that mountain ash. Now let us guide the other foot into this chink, and first move your hands to that large fern. That is famous ; now, if you feel steady, just look through the waterfall. Do you see, it leaves a little clear space between itself and the rock behind ? Is it not lovely ?'

Poor Nellie was not in a very happy state for admiring anything : she felt hanging between earth and sky.

‘Two or three more strides down,’ cried Georgie, ‘and there is a great stone we can sit upon. There, you are safely landed so far.’

‘I wish I were half as active as you,’ said Nellie, panting; ‘I never could have got down there but for your help. But what a delightful place! I must learn to scramble down here alone; for I shall not be satisfied till I have made a good drawing of this picturesque little fall. Is there much more trouble to get to the bottom?’

‘Not much,’ said Georgie, ‘only one steep place; but if you rest your hands on my shoulders, you can slip down easily enough.’

But Agnes was obliged to come up again to help Nellie down the steep place; and with much laughing and merriment she at last reached the bottom, and threw herself on a grass bank quite out of breath. ‘Oh, it is most lovely!’ she cried; ‘how good of you to help me down that place! I wonder did any one ever think of coming down it but you?’

‘I will fetch some water in your tins,’ said Georgie, ‘whilst you make your outlines.’

‘Oh, I must rest a bit; my hand is too shaky to draw yet,’ said Nellie. ‘What a strange thing is

habit! There are you two girls like a couple of squirrels, I suppose from living always in the country; and I, who have never climbed anything more difficult than a staircase, am as stiff and helpless as an old cow. I am quite vexed with myself.'

'Then if you give Agnes lessons in drawing,' said Georgie, 'I will teach you to climb and scramble about. I am quite pleased that I can do that better than you.'

Whilst the two sketchers were at work, Georgie searched about for ferns, new plants, grasses, and flowers.

Agnes could not help watching the bold, effective strokes that seemed to fall so easily from Nellie's pencil, and the colouring surprised her still more. Nellie's way of dashing on all sorts of paints was so very different from the careful way in which she proceeded; and the vigorous, good sketch produced was so unlike her own, that she felt rather discouraged. 'How weak and spiritless mine looks beside yours!' she said. 'I shall ask you to let me copy this one. It is beautiful.'

'Such a good subject,' said Nellie, 'makes one draw it well. You are quite welcome to the sketch, for I mean to make dozens here. But had we not better think of returning? Have we to mount up there again?'

'No,' said Agnes, 'there is a path through the wood that brings us out near the Lodge. Perhaps we had better set off.'

They collected their materials, and had a quiet stroll home.

'We will have our tea in the breakfast-room,' said Nellie; 'I like it so much, and it looks into that dear little garden.'

'Ah! there is Constance's friend, the piano,' cried Georgie; 'at least what she used to call her own. Mamma thought Mr. Oliver Norland ought to have let her take it.'

'Why,' said Nellie, 'there is one now in the school-room, or the room that was especially for Constance. Was not that hers? It is not a very good one. This is an excellent piano.'

'The schoolroom one was what she had till very lately, and then Mr. Norland made her a present of this and the canterbury and music-stool. You see they all match; and all those books have her name in them.'

'I think decidedly she ought to have had her own piano,' said Nellie; 'and it is really to me a nicer instrument than that in the drawing-room. Play something, Agnes, while I make the tea.'

Agnes played pretty well, and remembered her music perfectly. She played a mazurka and a fantasia brilliantly and correctly.

Georgie, too, was tolerably proficient. 'Ah,' she thought, 'Nellie won't beat Agnes at that.' 'You must play to us before we go home,' she said.

'I will,' returned Nellie, 'if we have time; but we have spent so much of our day out of doors that it is already late, and I like to loiter over tea. Do not you?'

'Yes,' said Georgie, laughing, 'especially when there is such beautiful fruit to loiter over.'

Nellie amused them very much, while they were at tea, by anecdotes of her schoolfellows.

But it seemed to Agnes that less was thought of the studies and the work than anything else; and she wondered the more how Nellie had gathered so much. She could scarcely believe the clock to be right when she heard eight struck, and sprang up at once. 'We should have been home, Georgie. Are you sure,' she said to Nellie, 'that it is really so late?'

'I believe the stable clock is quite to be relied on,' returned Nellie. 'I will not come with you to hinder you, for I know you will go much faster without me;' and she helped to put on hats and gloves, and with a warmly-expressed hope that they would soon come again, said 'Good-bye' to them at the hall door. The two girls hurried along the park, and arrived breathless at their own door.

'I was beginning to think you late,' said their mother as they entered the drawing-room.

‘We are late, dear mamma,’ said Agnes; ‘I was quite startled at hearing the clock strike eight. Really Nellie is very amusing; and we have not had a flagging moment to-day. Do not look so scornful at me, Constance. Certainly Nellie has the gift of amusing her guests. You will say so one of these days.’

Constance shook her head.

‘Yes, you will,’ cried Georgie. ‘You must contrive to separate her entirely from all ideas of Cousin Oliver and your papa’s absence; and then you must shut your eyes and ears to certain vulgarisms, I suppose they are, and you will find Nellie clever and amusing, and most kind.’

‘Then you allow that she is vulgar?’ asked Constance.

‘There is something in her manner and her way of speaking that is not nice,’ said Agnes. ‘I cannot define it. It is not like mamma and Lady Constance; and she is awkward in her movements, and inclined to be gaudy in her dress. I suppose all that is what people call vulgarity.’

‘I suppose so too,’ said her mother; ‘but through this veil you can discern her goodness and cleverness.’

‘I dare say the school she went to,’ said Constance, ‘was full of similar girls. What could she learn there that one would care for?’

‘We must leave it to time, I see,’ said Agnes, smiling, ‘to make all smooth between you and Nellie,

And now I will show you something she gave me.' And she handed the sketch of the fall to her mother.

'That is a good and spirited sketch,' said Mrs. Walton. 'It is our favourite little fall, and very like, very correct. How did Nellie come by it? I should say it was a hasty sketch by some good artist. There is some carelessness in the foreground, but I admire it much.'

'That is charming, mamma!' cried Georgie. 'How nicely you are taken in! A good artist, indeed! Nellie did it in about half an hour or three quarters; dashed it in as if it were the easiest thing imaginable. And she has made such pretty sketches of the river.'

'You quite surprise me,' said Mrs. Walton. 'I suppose she learnt this at the school Constance so despises. But she must have naturally the touch and feeling of a true artist.'

'Now, mamma,' said Agnes, 'I will be humble and show you mine, done by her side and in the same time. You must say that it is feeble and spiritless compared with hers.'

'It is very inferior, I allow,' said her mother; 'still I see nothing to discourage you in the difference. I still think what I thought before, that with perseverance and practice you will draw landscape very well. Such a drawing as this fall, by such a young girl, is very uncommon indeed.'

‘Were I you, Agnes,’ exclaimed Constance, ‘I would never touch pencil or brush again if such as Nellie can beat you.’

‘Nay, dear Constance,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘that is somewhat conceited. You do not surely expect my girls or yourself to excel in everything—to paint, play, sing, speak languages, or dance better than any other girls in the world. And would you deprive yourself of the pleasure of being a tolerably good artist because another paints better?’

‘I am so far from giving it up,’ said Agnes, ‘that I have asked Nellie to teach me a little, to let me sketch beside her. Even this drawing is better than I should have done it yesterday, from watching her. You will not object, mamma, to my going sometimes to sketch with her in the park?’

‘Not in the least,’ replied her mother; ‘I see no reason why you should not be friendly with Nellie; and I am glad you are willing to benefit by her superiority.’

‘Well, mamma,’ said Georgie, ‘shall I tell you what we did? First we had dinner, everything looking just the same as the last time we dined there the day after Mr. Oliver came. I assure you, Constance, I felt quite grieved to see Nellie just where Lady Constance used to be; not that I don’t like Nellie, but I never before felt how completely Lady Constance was gone from the place. After dinner, Nellie asked

us if we would like to go into the old part of the house, and we went into the library to get the keys. They were in a drawer in the old library table in the inner room, where your papa used to sit, Constance. I remember peeping in at the door one day when you took a message to him.'

'And this Nellie runs into my dear papa's quiet little study,' exclaimed Constance, 'and rummages in the table drawers when she likes? I can't bear to hear it!'

'You know it is for a time quite Mr. Ashby's own house,' said Georgie; 'and Nellie says she may go into his room when she likes, and do what she likes. So she took the bunch of keys, and we looked through the rooms that old Mr. Norland used to live in.'

'They are very desolate-looking, mamma,' said Agnes, 'especially the library with all its empty shelves. And after we had been there, we went to the ruin, and Nellie brought her sketches to show us. Then we walked to the fall. She said she meant to make a sketch of every handsome tree in the deer park.'

'And when we reached the fall, mamma,' cried Georgie, 'you cannot imagine how surprised she was to see Agnes go straight down so easily. I was such a time getting her down, putting one foot into a niche for her, and then guiding the other to a safe stone. I had her great broad foot in my hands many times.'

But she was so good-natured, and laughed so at her own awkwardness.'

'And when we reached the edge of the meadow,' said Agnes, 'just below the fall, she made that famous sketch. Then we had only time to walk back and have tea. She asked me to play, and I did a little. After tea she was to have played, but we had not time.'

'I did not think she seemed very anxious to play,' said Georgie. 'I fancy she does not shine in that as much as in painting.'

'You shall ask her to tea some evening,' said Mrs. Walton; 'then Constance and I can also make up our opinion respecting her.'

'We ought to go to Mrs. Brand's now,' said Georgie; 'we have plenty to tell her.'

'You are becoming quite dissipated,' said her mother, smiling. 'We will let Mrs. Brand wait for a day or two. You know Constance was to go too. She has scarcely yet even seen Nellie, so could say nothing on the subject, and you would have all the talking to yourself.'

'She generally has that, I think,' said Constance, 'wherever she is.'

'Not where Nellie is, I assure you,' cried Georgie; 'you have no idea how she talks, and tells so many amusing things. You will see soon, I hope.' And away she went to bed.



CHAPTER VIII.

Constance is very cold and distant to Nellie—Envies her Spirited Playing—Visit to Mrs. Brand—Gardening—Cabinet of Curiosities—Letter from Lady Constance—Bad News from the West Indies.

NEXT day a note from Nellie invited Agnes to join her in sketching part of the ruined cloister ; she engaged to have paints, brushes, etc., all ready for her, that she might have nothing to bring.

‘ You had better go, Agnes,’ said her mother ; ‘ and beg her to come back with you to tea here.’

Agnes went, and shortly before tea-time the two girls appeared. They had been very industrious. Agnes had made the outline of two sketches, and had begun to colour one ; and Nellie had made one complete sketch.

‘ Look, mamma,’ said Agnes, ‘ Nellie showed me how she began her sky, and I really think this sketch of mine will be better than what I have done yet ; and see what a beauty Nellie’s is !’

‘ I make no doubt that you will improve fast,’ said

Mrs. Walton, 'if you continue to sketch with so good an artist ; for really, Nellie, you have an unusually good touch and taste. You must make the utmost of such a talent.'

'Do you think it so good?' said Nellie. 'Papa hopes that I shall one day sketch well, he says ; and he is a very good painter himself.'

'Then you have every motive for working at it,' replied Mrs. Walton. 'You must be very hot and thirsty, let us go into tea.'

Constance had not said a word since Nellie entered. At last Nellie, who had looked at her often with much interest in her countenance, said—

'You will perhaps be glad, Miss Norland, to hear that your pony is quite well, and in good order ; would you like to ride him? I should have such pleasure in sending him down for you every day.'

'My pony !' exclaimed Constance. 'I understood the horses were all sold.'

'So they were,' returned Nellie ; 'but my papa was the purchaser of the pony, because he wished me to learn to ride ; but I am such a foolish coward, that I have never yet ventured to get on his back ; but I go to see him, and have got so far as patting him. So he really wants some exercise ; please ride him sometimes.'

Constance could scarcely repress her tears at the

idea of her handsome pony belonging to Nellie. She answered stiffly and coldly—

‘Thank you, I do not wish to ride now.’

‘If you will make the same offer to me,’ said Georgie, laughing, ‘I would say thank you in a different tone ; and Agnes and I could have, what we have never yet enjoyed, a ride together.’

‘Then I do make the offer to you,’ said Nellie ; ‘send up for the pony whenever you like.’

‘But, my dear,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘that plan will not further your papa’s wish that you should ride yourself. Would it not be better for you to join Agnes or Georgie in their rides?’

‘Perhaps I might venture with Agnes some day,’ replied Nellie ; ‘but I should be afraid of you, Georgie.’

‘What!’ cried Georgie, ‘after the care I took to help you safely to the bottom of the fall. I call that ungrateful. But I acknowledge that I like a good scamper.’

‘Then you shall have your scamper to-morrow,’ said Nellie. ‘When shall I send the pony?’

‘Has he no name?’ asked Mrs. Walton. ‘Children’s ponies have generally superb names.’

She looked at Constance as she said this ; but Constance did not choose that Nellie should use her name for the pony, so she said nothing. Agnes saw that Constance looked obstinate and displeased ; so, wishing to turn attention from her, she said—

‘Name him yourself, Nellie, as he is now yours. Ours is “Sultan ;” what do you say to “Emperor ?”’

‘Capital !’ exclaimed Nellie ; ‘he is “Emperor,” and he shall pay you a visit to-morrow.’

‘And the day after you will ride yourself?’ asked Georgie.

‘I am so much afraid of all animals,’ said Nellie. ‘I know I shall not dare to mount when the moment comes.’

‘We arranged that I should teach you to scramble and climb,’ said Georgie ; ‘add riding to it, pray do. Do you think I am to be trusted, mamma ?’

‘With Joseph present I think you are,’ said her mother. ‘Shall we walk out this evening, or remain at home and have some music ?’

‘I should like the music,’ said Nellie ; ‘and will you not walk up the park with me when I return ?’

‘Yes,’ said Georgie ; ‘then come into the drawing-room. Will you play to us now ?’

‘You first,’ said Nellie ; ‘I feel shy of playing before your mamma.’

So Georgie played her last new piece of music : she never could bear any of her old ones. This present favourite was an air with variations, by Rosellen, very pretty, and not very easy. Georgie played it clearly and well.

‘That is very well,’ said Nellie, who was standing

by her ; ‘ have you only learnt from your mamma ? She must have spent much time upon you. There were girls at school who had masters for years, and did not play half so well. I had that piece of music once, but I have quite forgotten it. Will Agnes play something now ? ’

‘ What do you like ? ’ said Agnes, turning over her portfolio. ‘ Here are some of the *Lieder ohne Worte* ; but I really cannot play them. I look forward to them in a few years. Here is Wallace’s “ *Gondolier*,” and “ *The Wedding March*.” ’

‘ Oh ! that, please,’ said Nellie. ‘ I am very fond of it. You do that long shake famously. Does not Miss Norland play ? ’

‘ I am not going to play to-night,’ said Constance dryly.

‘ Then look through my music, Nellie,’ said Agnes, ‘ and pick out something. Here is a sonata of Beethoven’s, and the overture to “ *Zampa*,” and a tarantella of Heller’s.’

‘ I believe I know that,’ said Nellie, seating herself ; and Constance looked up with an amused and contemptuous expression, for she and Agnes had both been learning the difficult tarantella, and had not nearly mastered it. The idea of Nellie pretending to play it struck her as ludicrous. But the contemptuous expression changed to one of surprise at Nellie’s

first bar. She went through the piece with astonishing rapidity, vigour, and precision, and Constance vowed to herself that she never would touch a note in presence of Nellie. It was evident that her music left them all far in the background. Agnes and Georgie were eager in their praises of Nellie's playing, and begged for something more. She played a march, then a waltz.

'Oh! mamma,' cried Agnes, 'do you think I shall ever play like that?'

'You are too modest,' said Nellie; 'I do not see much difference between your playing and mine. I do not think I could play "The Wedding March" at all better than you did.'

'But I do see an immense difference,' said Agnes; 'there is as much between your playing and mine, as between your sketch and mine, and the same sort of difference.'

'I play louder than you, perhaps,' said Nellie; 'but that is not wonderful, if you compare the hands.' And she laid her own large, broad hand beside that of Agnes.

'Do explain, mamma, what I mean,' cried Agnes, snatching away her delicate-looking hand from the grasp of Nellie.

'It is,' said Mrs. Walton, 'that Nellie infuses a spirit and vigour into both painting and playing

which you much lack. You are correct enough in both, but you want force ; what you do is too tame.'

'And poor me !' cried Georgie. 'I am not worth comparing at all, I suppose.'

'Don't say that,' interposed Nellie. 'You play better than I did a year since ; and I should not wonder if you played better, in a year or two more, than I do now.'

'I shall try hard, at any rate,' cried Georgie.

'See how much good a little emulation can effect !' said Mrs. Walton. 'This painting and playing of yours, Nellie, will incite my girls to work, more than much urging and labour on my part would have done. Shall we now set out to walk back with you ? Constance, you have not been out to-day ; pray, come with us.'

As they sauntered along the park, Nellie made another vain attempt to engage Constance in conversation. She asked if she were fond of flowers. Constance could not but say 'Yes ;' and then Nellie, saying she supposed Constance was familiar with all the plants in the little garden by the breakfast-room, went on to describe a few alterations she had made, and how she rose early on purpose to work among the flower-beds. Talking partly to Constance, and partly to Mrs. Walton, she did not observe the look of annoyance on the face of the former, and continued

her gardening details until Constance took an opportunity to drop back, and quit her place beside Nellie.

‘You must make much excuse for poor Constance,’ said Mrs. Walton, seeing Nellie’s surprise at this sudden desertion. ‘She feels very much the loss of her home, and all its pleasant occupations. She can scarcely bear to hear of her old garden, or her pony, or of anything connected with the Abbey. And her avoidance of you is merely because she cannot reconcile herself to the idea of any one else in her place.’

‘I hope you think,’ said Nellie, ‘that I only wished to please her when I offered her the pony. I would on no account add to her sorrow. I can believe how painful the sight of me must be. But I hope in time she will let me love her.’

‘I fully give you credit,’ returned Mrs. Walton, ‘for everything that is kind, and hope that Constance will soon appreciate your good feeling towards her.’

They left Nellie at the Abbey door, and had a pleasant walk home.

A day or two after this, Agnes, Georgie, and Constance went to drink tea with Mrs. Brand. Mrs. Walton promised to fetch them in the evening. They found their friend in the garden.

‘Now I shall set you all to work for an hour,’ she

said, 'so as to earn an appetite for your tea. I want all these walnuts gathered. I have waited many days for the gardener to be at liberty, and I will not wait any more, if you will help me.'

'I will go up the ladder,' cried Georgie, 'and beat the boughs, and Agnes and Constance can pick them up. May I go for the ladder?'

'You will find John in the yard,' said Mrs. Brand; 'ask him to bring it.' Away went Georgie.

'I see she knows where all your things are as well as those at home,' said Constance. 'I never yet heard any one ask for a thing, that Georgie did not know where to find it.'

'That is a most convenient and useful quality,' replied Mrs. Brand; 'do you not approve of it?'

'Oh! very much,' said Constance; 'indeed, I think Georgie is delightful altogether.'

'And Agnes, where is she? I believe she is gone to fetch the baskets; quietly useful as usual. I hope you also like my dear Agnes?'

'Oh! I do very much,' said Constance; 'but she is graver and quieter; so, as I am grave and quiet myself, I think Georgie suits me best.'

'Well, I am very glad,' said Mrs. Brand, 'that you appreciate your companions; and, left as you are, I consider it most fortunate that you have chanced upon two such as Agnes and Georgie. There they

come.' Agnes was laden with three or four baskets ; Georgie had two long light poles ; and the gardener carried a small ladder, which he placed against one of the walnut-trees.

'If you could wait till to-morrow,' said the man, touching his hat to Mrs. Brand, 'I could do the job. I fear it is beyond the young ladies.'

'I know that your master has to send you to Barnley to-morrow,' she replied, 'and I shall lose my catsup. No ; I think we shall manage. That will do.'

The trees were not large, and Georgie, mounted on the ladder, soon knocked down showers of walnuts.

'Agnes,' said their hostess, 'I cannot let you spoil your nice gloves ; run in for two pair of gardening gloves, for you and Constance, and put your own in your pockets.' Thus equipped, they gathered up almost as fast as Georgie could throw down ; and when the baskets were full, they carried them in, and emptied them into large basins in the store-room. They enjoyed their work much. It was a fresh, bright afternoon, and they were glad to do something for Mrs. Brand, who was a favourite with all. They had nearly housed all the walnuts before the bell rang for tea.

'Must we not just finish ?' said Georgie, from her perch. 'There are but a few dozens more.'

'No ; come down at once,' said Mrs. Brand. 'You

know I am terribly punctual, and never keep a meal waiting, or anything else that is ordered at a particular time. So these few walnuts must take a ten minutes from John's avocation to-morrow morning ; and I thank you much for your effective help.'

When they were seated at the table, Mrs. Brand said—

'Now I shall like to hear something about the neighbour at the Abbey. I suppose you have made acquaintance by this time?'

'Yes ; indeed,' cried Georgie, 'we are quite good friends. Agnes and I spent a very nice day there, and she came to tea with us.'

'Then I will ask Constance first,' said Mrs. Brand, 'what she thinks of Miss Nellie.'

Constance coloured. 'I am sure,' she said, 'you only wish me to say what I really think. She is a vulgar, forward, though clever girl. I do not fancy her at all. I never shall be friendly with her!'

'Are you sure,' said Mrs. Brand, laying her hand on Constance's arm, 'that there is no little sore feeling about your beloved old home, in your dislike to this girl? But let me hear what you say, Georgie.'

'I confess,' said Georgie, 'that there is something rough and awkward about her, and that she has an ugly way of speaking ; but she is most kind and pleasant, very amusing, and extremely clever. So I like her.'

‘And you, Agnes?’ said Mrs. Brand.

‘I think very much as Georgie does. There is so much that is good about her, that we ought to like her. And I do think you mistake, Constance, in saying she is forward. I think she is most modest.’

‘How do you know she is so clever?—you all agree in that,’ said Mrs. Brand.

‘She draws really beautifully,’ said Agnes. ‘Mamma was quite surprised at her sketch of the fall; and she plays the piano quite as well, in such a spirited way; and she seems much at home in all sorts of things.’

‘Then I hope,’ said Mrs. Brand, ‘that you will make the most of so good a neighbour, and see her often; there is no chance at all of your imbibing what you call her ugly way of speaking, or her rough awkward ways. She may improve you, and you may improve her. Dear Constance, do not make that indignant little toss of your head because I said she might improve you. You will agree with me some day.’

‘If she would let me alone,’ said Constance, ‘I should not mind her so much; but she will try to be familiar with me; and I could not bear her offering me my own pony. It seemed putting me down so, and elevating herself. And then telling me how she had altered this and that in my garden.’

‘I believe she meant nothing but kindness in both

those things,' said Agnes. 'I am sure she does not suppose that you could feel angry with her, because chance has made her father master of what was once yours.'

'We must leave it to time, Agnes,' said Mrs. Brand, smiling. 'Just now Constance will put a wrong colouring on whatever Nellie may do or say. I say to you and Georgie, just let it alone.'

Mrs. Brand had two old-fashioned Indian cabinets filled with a variety of odd and curious foreign things. It was a great delight to Agnes and Georgie to look through the whole; and though they had fingered everything contained in the drawers many times, it was now a new diversion to them to show them to Constance, and make her guess what was the use of some strange Chinese and Japanese things. One drawer was full of curious seeds and pods from different climates, and Constance wondered that Mrs. Brand did not plant these.

'They would come to nothing, my dear,' she replied. 'Those beautiful seeds from tropical islands would very likely not take root at all here, and could come to no perfection in this climate. Perhaps it might in a hot-house attain a stunted and wretched resemblance of its real self; but as I have no hot-house, I prefer keeping the seeds. Once I planted some seeds of "caroubier," or evergreen acacia, which

flourishes on the coasts of the Mediterranean. They grew in pots in the greenhouse, and looked like miniature trees ; but they never did more.'

'We have plenty of beautiful trees that like our climate, have we not?' said Georgie.

'Indeed we have. In no land, I think, is there more various and beautiful vegetation. We may be well satisfied with our share,' replied Mrs. Brand. 'How do you progress with the study of trees, and their origin?'

'Not at all,' said Agnes, laughing. 'I do not think we have learnt one thing about any tree since the day we determined to study them. But this time we have had a little excuse for not holding to our resolve. You know the day after our Fern Valley day the sad affair at the Abbey began, and then Constance came, and then Nellie and her family arrived.'

'Yes ; I confess,' said Mrs. Brand, 'that you have had much to turn your heads ; but you know that you and Georgie excel in the art of making most excellent plans, and then do not manage to carry them out. I feel sure that you have already made plans with Nellie, have you not?'

'Yes,' said Agnes ; 'we have engaged to sketch together often in the afternoon or evening. We shall make about a dozen sketches of the old ruin, and a great many of the trees in the deer park, and

several of the fall ; and we are going to learn some difficult duets for the piano together.'

'That is excellent, if you do it,' said Mrs. Brand. 'And you, Georgie?'

'I have promised to teach her to ride, and to scramble and climb.'

'Excellent, too, if you do not lame her in the process. And you, Constance, steadily hold back from all these plans?'

'Yes ; quite,' said Constance. 'I should take no pleasure in companionship with Nellie. There comes Mrs. Walton.'

'Then, my dears,' said Mrs. Brand, 'shut up all the drawers of the cabinet, and leave them as neat as before you touched them.'

'I have news for you, dear Constance,' said Mrs. Walton as she entered.

'A letter !' cried Constance, springing towards her. 'Yes, indeed, a letter from my dear mamma.'

'You had better go away to the garden and read it,' said Mrs. Walton, 'while I talk to Mrs Brand.'

'Come, Agnes,' said Constance, 'come and read it with me ; it is but a small letter.'

They went away together.

'I am not wanted, it seems,' said Georgie, putting on a doleful voice ; 'so I will go and talk to the calf and the chickens, may I not?—and the tiny little cow?'

Mrs. Brand nodded, and off she ran.

‘Your news is good, I trust?’ asked Mrs. Brand.

‘Yes, as far as it goes. They had not arrived, but a passing ship brought the letter; in fact, mine is only a few words, and one to Constance enclosed. They had had tolerable weather, and were anxiously expecting their release from the confinement of a ship. There could, of course, be little to tell. Lady Constance hopes that Oliver is making himself and every one else happy.’

‘I believe his tenants will succeed much better in that respect than he would ever have done. Mrs. Ashby goes about a good deal, and the cottagers and tenants are beginning to know and like her.’

Constance ran in again. ‘I suppose,’ she said to Mrs. Walton, ‘that you heard all about mamma, as this letter was in yours. How tired they are of the ship! Only fancy their not having arrived all this time; and they will not get my letter and yours till about a fortnight after they land!’

‘It is pleasant, however,’ said Mrs. Brand, ‘to know that they are well and hopeful so far.’

‘And only think,’ said Constance; ‘mamma says, “I hope you are quite kind and polite to your Cousin Oliver whenever you meet. I should be much grieved if he thought that we or that you bore him any ill-will on account of his just claim.”’

‘ You see, Constance,’ said Mrs. Walton gravely, ‘ that your mamma would not be pleased if she knew how you had even avoided speaking to him. And I do not feel sure that she would like your present feelings towards Nellie. However, you must write to her, and say just what you think about the Ashby family.’

Constance did this, and enlarged much upon the annoyance it was to her that Nellie should have her pony, and piano, and her dear cloister garden. ‘ Will you understand, dear mamma,’ she said, ‘ that I would much rather that Cousin Oliver, disagreeable as he was, should have remained, because, at any rate, he was a gentleman ; and the idea of the dear Abbey being let away from us all is so much worse by their being vulgar, unpleasant people. And then to find that Nellie draws, and plays, and knows languages splendidly, is really very irritating. She came into our study one day, and Agnes showed her a piece of German over which she had been puzzling for half an hour, and Nellie told her what it meant in a moment. I declare I could with pleasure have thrown the great German dictionary at her. But Agnes thanked her, and did not seem in the least vexed, although Nellie is a year younger than her. I do not know that I should care so much if she had not supplanted me at the Abbey.’

This letter was sent, with one from Mrs. Walton.

Some time elapsed before they heard again. The sketching plan went on steadily. Nellie often sent to the Lodge for Agnes, and they worked with perseverance at the trees, and the ruin, and the fall with much benefit to both, and Nellie did her best to like the riding. She promised Georgie to ride twice in the week with her, if she and Agnes would at other times ride 'Emperor'—so he was always called, for Constance obstinately refused to tell *her* name for him. Once or twice Georgie persuaded her to ride. She went on condition that she should ride 'Sultan,' leaving 'Emperor' for Georgie.

Mrs. Ashby proved herself a kind and pleasant neighbour to Mrs. Walton, and soon made herself beloved by all the poor within her reach. Mr. Ashby attended well to the estate; and Mrs. Walton felt that the home of her dear friends might indeed have passed into worse hands.

At last another letter came from Jamaica. It was to Mrs. Walton, and one was enclosed to Constance. Georgie could not help watching their faces as they read, though she carefully shut her lips to avoid exclaiming, 'I see, mamma, you have not very good news.' When Constance reached the end of hers, she looked up, and meeting Mrs. Walton's glance, she cried—

'I have no nice news. Is your letter just the

same? Oh! I am so disappointed. I thought papa would soon become rich again; but there is no chance of such a thing. Mamma says I cannot understand all the reasons; but the sugar estate is worth very little indeed—not enough to induce papa to stay there. So he will never be able to buy back the Abbey. Oh dear! I wonder what papa will do!’ And Constance flung herself back on the sofa in a flood of tears.

‘My letter is much the same in substance,’ said Mrs. Walton, ‘except that your mother mentions one thing that cannot, I think, be in your letter. It is, that as things there are so very unpromising, your papa says the best plan for him is to settle again in London, and take up the profession he once began there. So, Constance, you have a chance of seeing your parents much sooner than if the estate had promised well. Is not that a pleasant bit of news?’

Constance half smiled. ‘It is indeed,’ she said. ‘Mamma does not tell me that. Oh! how glad I shall be to see them! But to live in a little house in London, and papa working hard! That will be very sad; and no prospect at all of his coming back here.’

‘My dear Constance, your mother does not repine. She says she hopes they will soon be quietly established in London, and you with them again. In short, they only remain out there to make as advan-

tageous a sale as possible of the whole estate and house. But they do not expect it will bring them much.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Constance; 'but I had so believed and thought that they would return with money enough to purchase back the Abbey from Cousin Oliver; and I am so disappointed!'

'I am sure that your parents themselves never had any such idea,' said Mrs. Walton. 'Pray think no more of such a thing. Try to look forward to a cheerful home in London, from which no one can turn you.'

'There is Nellie!' cried Georgie, darting out. 'I heard her voice.'

Nellie was now so constant a visitor, that Constance did not take the trouble to get out of her way. She only lay back on the sofa-cushion to read her letter again, and Nellie was accustomed to her taking no notice of her sometimes. She came to ask the two sisters to drive with her in a little carriage that her father had lately bought. He found that Nellie did not much care for riding, in spite of Georgie's precepts; so one day he surprised her with a pretty little carriage just fitted to 'Emperor.'

'He draws it so nicely,' said Nellie. 'I am too cowardly to drive myself, and papa said that little Joe the groom had better go with me the first time.'

So,' she added, turning to Constance, 'you must excuse my not begging you to come too, to-day, for it only holds four.'

Constance muttered something, turning her head away.

'Constance has just received a letter from her mother which grieves her,' said Mrs. Walton.

'Oh! I am so sorry that I teased her by speaking,' said the good-natured girl. And the three set out.





CHAPTER IX.

Nellie describes the Ride with her Father—She pities Constance much—She persuades her Father to send the Piano which belonged to Constance down to the Lodge—Constance's Pride—Mrs. Walton's Remonstrance—Georgie determines to draw as well as her Sister, and induces Constance to do the same.

AWAY went the light little vehicle with its merry occupants, little Joe driving, and the three girls at liberty to talk.

'Was it not kind of papa,' said Nellie, 'to get me this dear little carriage? I was so ashamed of myself the other day when you know he took me to ride with him. I started famously; but when he stopped to speak to the old woman at the Lodge, "Emperor" wanted to go on, and frightened me by pulling; then papa cantered much faster than I liked, and I got the two bridles entangled, and kept pulling the wrong one, which stopped "Emperor" short. Then, worst of all, papa told me to hold his rein while he tightened his own girth; and oh, Georgie, fancy his great horse putting his nose quite close to me! I screamed out, and papa

said I was a sad baby. Then we went through the wood near the fall, and a bough caught my shoulder, and somehow my foot got out of the stirrup, and I screamed again to papa to come and put it in. Altogether, he said I was a little goose, and never would make a good horsewoman.'

'I am afraid he thought but little of my teaching,' said Georgie. 'You know I could not make you bold, if you were naturally cowardly.'

'And by displaying your nervousness,' said Agnes, laughing, 'you have become the possessor of this beautiful little carriage, which you would not have had if you had ridden well.'

'No! I may comfort myself with that idea,' said Nellie; 'and this runs so very smoothly, that I think you may almost tempt Constance to come out in it some day.'

'I wonder you think about her,' said Georgie. 'How rude she was to you to-day!'

'She is never polite to me,' said Nellie; 'but I forgive it, because I really feel much for her, and to-day your mamma said she had some unpleasant news.'

'It was not altogether unpleasant,' said Agnes, 'because probably her father and mother will come back sooner than they expected, and live in London. But the bad part of the news was, that the sugar

estate was worth very little, and Mr. Norland will not return a rich man, as Constance hoped.'

'Then she will leave you, I suppose, when they return. Shall you be sorry to lose her?'

'Yes,' said Agnes, 'I am very fond of Constance; she is affectionate and nice, and I shall miss her much. I acknowledge she has not been agreeable to you. You would not recognise the same girl when she is alone with us. But I make great allowances for one who has had such a reverse.'

'Yes, surely every one would,' returned Nellie. 'I wonder whether it will ever come to light, the fate of that will, or why the old uncle destroyed it.'

'I do not see how anything can ever be known about it now,' said Agnes. 'He must have burnt it, box and all, as useless, when he turned everything out of his old room.'

'Indeed, there seems to be no hope,' said Georgie, 'that Constance will ever occupy her old home again, or possess *you*, "Emperor." She hoped, you know, Nellie, that her father would be able to buy the Abbey from his cousin, and that is why she is so cast down to-day at hearing there are no riches in prospect.'

'Poor girl!' said Nellie, 'she was very fond of the old place, then?'

'Extremely fond of it; and she thought much of being the sole heiress to the place. The very day

before Mr. Oliver Norland came, she was saying to us how pleasant it was to consider that everything she saw out of our window would one day be her own,' said Agnes. 'She must often, I think, remember that speech now.'

'Well, I feel very sorry for her indeed,' repeated Nellie.

They went round by Mrs. Brand's to show her the new carriage. It was duly admired ; and, after a long drive, they returned to the Lodge, 'Emperor' having behaved splendidly.

'I believe,' said Nellie, as they left the carriage, 'I shall never wish to ride again ; you will have to exercise "Emperor" in that way.' They stood watching the pretty little vehicle as Joe drove quickly up the park.

'All your own, Nellie !' said Georgie ; 'carriage, pony, harness, and Joe ; for I believe he does nothing but attend to "Emperor." Do you feel much pleasure in the thought ?'

'No,' replied Nellie gravely ; 'I think I should not care for it much unless I had some one to enjoy it with ; and I could do that as well if it belonged to either of you. We may talk of the carriage without annoying Constance, as it never was hers.'

They found Mrs. Walton waiting tea for them. Constance rose from the piano as they entered.

‘Oh! I have never heard you play,’ cried Nellie; ‘please go on a little.’ But Constance had already shut the instrument.

‘I do not care for playing on the piano,’ she said. ‘My own was such a beauty; and really there is very little time now for me to play, for Agnes and Georgie have nearly doubled their practising time lately.’

‘That was your doing, Nellie,’ exclaimed Georgie; ‘we are in such a hurry to catch you! But you might double your time too, Constance, if you would get up a little earlier.’

‘You awake me so very early,’ said Constance, ‘with those abominable chromatic scales, that I am tired and sleepy when I ought to get up.’

‘Then,’ returned Georgie, ‘I will make a bargain with you. As soon as you hear me to-morrow morning, get up; and when you come down, I will resign to you the piano till breakfast-time.’

‘Thank you,’ said Constance; ‘but I have no object in doubling my practice. Mamma was quite satisfied with my music when she left.’

‘Ah!’ said Georgie, ‘she had not heard Nellie.’

Constance did not condescend to make any reply to this, and Nellie hurriedly began to talk about the carriage, and Joe’s good qualities—of anything, in short, that came into her head.

‘It has just occurred to me,’ said Agnes, ‘that Joe

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is a stranger to us. You must have brought him with you. He surely is not a Norland boy?’

‘No,’ replied Nellie. ‘He belongs to us quite. Papa found him on a door-step in Liverpool, half starved. He had no friends, and got a little employment about the docks, till he fell ill. Papa brought him home ; mamma had him nursed and made well ; then he was put under the coachman to learn to be a groom. So he has no home but with us.’

‘Then,’ said Georgie, ‘I was right in saying that the whole turn-out was your own, boy and all. But you set no more value on it for that reason, it seems.’

‘I do value Joe very much,’ said Nellie. ‘He is a good boy, and is so grateful, and so fond of papa.’

After tea the whole party set out for a walk, in the course of which Nellie was to be landed at her own home. Before she went to bed, she took a good look at the little piano in the breakfast-room, and the next morning she made her appearance early in her father’s study.

‘Well, Nellie,’ said Mr. Ashby, ‘you do not usually honour me before breakfast. What wonderful news have you for me?’

‘I have discovered something, papa,’ said Nellie, seating herself comfortably in the large chair ; ‘a great omission that was made by Mr. Norland when he left in such a hurry, and I want you to rectify it.’

‘But perhaps I may not have authority to rectify his omissions,’ said her father. ‘What is it?’

‘It is,’ replied Nellie, ‘that when poor Constance was packed off to Mrs. Walton at the Lodge, certainly all her own possessions ought to have gone with her, ought they not?’

‘Surely,’ said her father, ‘and they did so. I understood that all her clothes, books, and little personal belongings had been packed for her by her mother and Mrs. Walton, and sent to the Lodge.’

‘One of her chief possessions was forgotten, papa, and that was her own piano and music-stool and book-stand full of music-books.’

‘But, my dear Nellie,’ said her father, ‘surely those were part of the furniture of the house, though Constance may have used it, and called it her own.’

‘No, papa. Of course the grand piano in the drawing-room belongs to the house; but the little one was a present to Constance from one of her uncles, with the music-stool and books; and there is her name printed in all of them. It was not bought with Mr. Norland’s money. It really is Constance’s very own.’

‘If that is the case,’ said Mr. Ashby, ‘it certainly was an omission not sending it to the Lodge with her other things; but as it was let to me with everything else here, I do not see how I can take upon myself to send it away.’

‘Oh ! papa, if you told Mr. Norland—Mr. Oliver, I mean—that you found it belonged to Constance, he surely could say nothing.’

‘He might say,’ returned her father, ‘when the things were looked over, “What is become of the piano, book-stand, and music-stool that were left in the breakfast-room ?”’

‘Do you think that he has any idea whether there was a piano there or not, papa ?’ said Nellie.

‘I have no doubt, Nellie,’ said her father gravely, ‘that Mr. Norland does not know one half of the things he left here ; but I cannot think that my Nellie would wish me to do a dishonest thing, and not return everything, to the smallest article ?’

Nellie coloured up. ‘No, of course, papa ; I did not mean that.’

‘Besides,’ said her father, ‘there is the catalogue to tell tales. When I requested that Mr. Norland should leave me a proper inventory, he said there was no time, and he could not be troubled, and cared little about any of the old rubbish, as he called it. But after we entered here, you must remember that I had an inventory made, and a copy sent to Mr. Peter’s ; and there stands the piano in black and white, Nellie.’

‘Then, papa, I will tell you what you must do,’ said Nellie, ‘for I feel quite like a robber to keep Constance’s piano here. You will send it down to

the Lodge, and then you will buy just such another to replace it, and you may consider that as your present to me my next birthday. That's a dear good papa; you will do it, won't you?'

'I suppose I shall have no peace if I don't, Nellie,' said her father, laughing.

'And, papa,' she went on, 'you need not get the new piano until Mr. Norland returns, or till you give up the house, because I like the grand one, and shall always play upon that. Now, you are a very kind papa, and you will send Constance her things to-day, will you?'

'You may write a note if you like,' said Mr. Ashby, 'and say that I have great pleasure in sending her what should have gone before with her other property.'

'No, papa,' replied Nellie; 'you must please write the note. I don't want her to think I have anything to do with it. I want her to suppose that you have found out the piano is actually her own, and so, in common justice, you have sent it. I don't want her to feel obliged to me or to you. Do you see?'

'Is Constance so very scrupulous, then, Nellie?' asked her father, taking his writing-case.

'I can't quite explain, papa, about Constance's feelings; but I believe I understand them quite, and I am so sorry for her.'

‘Come then, Nellie, dictate,’ said her father, ‘so as not to rub against her feelings ; and if I approve what you dictate, it shall go.’

‘Go on, then, papa,’ said Nellie. ‘“ My dear Miss Norland,—I find that the small piano in the breakfast-room, with the book-stand, books, and music-stool, are your own property ; and supposing that its remaining here must have been a mere oversight on the part of Mr. Norland, I take it on myself to send these things down to the Lodge, as I feel I have no right to retain them here.—Believe me, yours sincerely.” There, papa ; won’t that do ?’

‘I have no objection to send it,’ said her father ; ‘and you can have the light cart to send the piano.’

‘Thank you, papa,’ cried Nellie. ‘I will see it properly wrapped up. I am quite happy about it.’ And away she went to give her orders about the cart.

‘You look much pleased about something,’ said her mother at breakfast. ‘What is it, Nellie ?’

She told her mother about the piano. ‘So, dear mamma,’ she said, directly after breakfast, ‘I am going to send off those three pretty pieces of furniture ; but I know of something that will fill the place very nicely, so that you will not miss the piano. I will settle it for you, mamma, if you will let me.’

‘I think it is very kind in you, Nellie,’ said her mother, ‘to care so much about Constance Norland.

She always appears to me a most uninteresting girl ; very pretty and elegant-looking certainly, but no life in her. I never heard her utter a word.'

'You are accustomed to my chattering, mamma,' said Nellie. 'I cannot say that Constance talks to me ; but I know, from the Waltons, how much she has felt her father's being turned out of the Abbey, and I feel very sorry for her. Only think, mamma, until Mr. Oliver Norland came back one day, she had no idea that she was not the sole heiress of this place, and had always been made much of, and petted and indulged.'

'Well, it certainly was a great change for her,' said Mrs. Ashby ; 'and parting with her mother and father must have been hard.'

'They will very likely soon come home again,' said Nellie. 'Agnes told me that Mr. Norland proposes living in London, and practising as a barrister, because the West Indian property will not be worth much.'

'Ah ! that is wise in him,' said Mr. Ashby. 'He will be as happy as a working busy man as he was here.'

'And I hope,' said Nellie, 'that poor Constance will be happy there too ; and now I will pack up her piano for her.'

The little party at the Lodge had just finished

dinner, when Susan brought in a note addressed to Constance, saying that a cart had come from the Abbey with some packages addressed to her. Constance opened the note.

‘It is from Mr. Ashby,’ she said; ‘he has sent my piano.’ And she gave the note to Mrs. Walton. ‘I wonder how he heard about its being mine.’

‘Of course Nellie told him,’ said Georgie.

‘No,’ returned Constance; ‘I think if she had anything to do with it, she would have written and said, “I have persuaded papa to send you your piano;” but there is not a word about her, and I am glad of that. He sends it because he thought it just that I should have my own.’

‘So you don’t feel obliged to him or to Nellie, you mean?’ said Georgie.

‘Yes. I am very glad to have my dear piano and my books,’ said Constance; ‘but I am more glad that it has been sent in this way.’

‘I feel convinced,’ cried Georgie, ‘that Nellie was the suggester of its coming. However, now it is here, where is it to be put. Can we do with two pianos in the drawing-room, mamma?’

‘No,’ said Mrs. Walton; ‘I think our own might stand in here very well, and Constance’s in its place in the drawing-room; and if you cannot find room for our canterbury in here, it might go up in your study.’

‘We can push our own piano in here,’ said Agnes. ‘So, Susan, will you tell Joseph to help the men who brought the cart to bring in the piano?’

‘See how carefully it is wrapped round with a blanket!’ whispered Georgie, as the men brought it in. ‘That is Nellie’s work, I’ll engage, Constance.’

‘Well,’ replied Constance, ‘don’t put me out of conceit with it. I mean to practise really now.’ And so she did, for the next morning, when Georgie had nearly finished her scales on the piano in the dining-room, she heard Constance begin.

‘Well, dear mamma,’ she cried, as Mrs. Walton came into the dining-room, ‘you must feel rather bewildered, I think, with these two pianos rousing you every morning; for I suppose Constance means to go on, as she has begun morning work.’

‘I only hear a confused sound of notes, dear Georgie,’ said her mother; ‘and I am glad to see you work away with energy at anything once undertaken. I begin to think you will be a good pianist; and if so, you will not regret these morning hours spent in working instead of sleeping.’

‘No, indeed,’ replied Georgie. ‘Oh! Constance, I am so glad you have been practising. Mr. Ashby’s kind present, or whatever you may call it, will not be wasted.’

‘Not his present, certainly,’ said Constance, ‘as

she seated herself at the table. 'He would not have sent it if he had not been sure that it was really my own.'

'But though such may be the case, Constance,' said Mrs. Walton, 'I do hope and request that you will either send a proper message through Nellie, or else write and thank Mr. Ashby for his kind thought of you; for he was in no way called upon to send you the piano, as it had been let with other things in the house, and I look upon it as a very good-natured act. I shall be sorry indeed if you do not also think so.'

'I think,' replied Constance, 'I would rather write and thank Mr. Ashby than send a message.'

'Very well,' returned Mrs. Walton, 'do so; but should you see Nellie to-day, try to be a little more friendly with her. I do think she merits better treatment from you; for she never omits the most pleasant and polite notice of you; and many girls in her place would have returned the contempt and indifference you have, I grieve to say, shown to her.'

'But I do not like her,' said Constance; 'I do not fancy her as Georgie and Agnes do. It is not only that she is in my place, but I never should have liked her wherever she might be; and am I obliged to be very intimate with one I do not like?'

'No,' replied Mrs. Walton; 'but you might be per-

fectly polite, and even show yourself grateful for the many little kindnesses she has offered. I see that word ruffles you; you cannot believe that you owe gratitude to one beneath you in birth.'

'And, mamma,' said Agnes, 'I think that neither Georgie nor I much "fancied," as Constance says, Nellie at first; but her extreme good temper and kindness obliged us to love her. Yes, Constance, I really said love her. I think no one could know Nellie without loving her. I do not understand how you can so keep up your dislike to her.'

'I understand it,' said Mrs. Walton, 'because I know that it proceeds from pride; and if you cannot overcome it from better motives, dear Constance, I must desire that in obedience to me you will show politeness, at the very least, to Nellie and to any of her family you may meet. I did not say this before, because I hoped your own sense would have shown you how wrong your conduct is, and how inferior you really are to the girl you despise.'

Constance began to cry. She had seldom been found fault with. Her life had been so unruffled by anything that could possibly try her, that it was new to find herself blamed. However, she saw that Mrs. Walton was in earnest; so, when Nellie appeared in the afternoon to ask the three girls to spend some time with her in the ruin, Constance returned her

cheerful 'Good morning,' and added, 'I am going to send a note to Mr. Ashby to thank him for thinking of sending me my piano. I am very glad indeed to have it.' Nellie coloured up with pleasure at the unusual greeting, saying, 'I am so very glad you were pleased. I wish papa had heard it was yours long ago; I am sure he would have sent it.'

'It was very kind indeed,' said Mrs. Walton. 'But, my dear Nellie, though it is actually Constance's, as it was left in the house, will not Mr. Oliver Norland expect to find it there when he returns?'

Nellie rather hesitated, for she did not wish Constance to know that she had talked to her father about it; and anything short of the whole truth was very unfamiliar to her.

'I heard papa say,' she said at last, 'that he intended to buy another piano and stool and music-stand for the breakfast-room.' Mrs. Walton inquired no further, as she saw that Nellie did not wish to expose her own share in the matter, especially as Constance appeared pleased as it was. The four girls went out together, Nellie and Agnes proposing to finish their last sketch of the ruin. They had each done six: those by Agnes were very creditable to her age and the little instruction she had had, and Nellie's were really very good. Whilst they worked at their drawings, Constance had her piece of embroidery—

a handkerchief which was to be sent to her mother ; and Georgie had an amusing book which she read aloud now and then.

‘ I shall be quite sorry,’ said Agnes, ‘ when these sketches are all done, I have so much enjoyed doing them.’

‘ We must find something else that will give us a series of views. We must not go back, now that we have made some progress.’

‘ But I,’ said Georgie, ‘ am quite left behind. Before you came, Nellie, and Agnes made such a great spring in her drawing, I used to draw always with her ; but now I have altogether given it up ; and so have you too, I think, Constance.’

‘ I have not drawn at all certainly since I have lived with you,’ said Constance. ‘ I used regularly to copy something every day when I was at home.’

‘ It is a great pity,’ said Agnes, ‘ that you do not continue it. Suppose you make a point of sketching out of doors always with me ; and you too, Georgie.’

‘ Really,’ said Georgie, laughing, ‘ my scratches do not deserve to be called drawings beside those of yours. I must say it is rather discouraging to be left miles behind in the course of a month or two.’

‘ You forget,’ said Agnes, ‘ that I have worked hard during that time, and you have done nothing. If I had been discouraged at the sight of Nellie’s beauti-

ful sketches, I should have remained where I was, as you have done.'

'Well !' cried Georgie, 'it really was cowardly in me to give up when I saw how you were beating me. I think I will try again. You shall advise me, Nellie, what to do. I must not take too high flights just at first.'

'You cannot,' said Nellie, 'try anything better or more simple than this archway that we are now drawing ; but instead of taking the whole landscape through the arch, sit further on one side, so that you will only see the ivy on the edge of the arch, and that light birch-tree. We shall need another day at ours, I think, Agnes. If we come to-morrow, do bring your materials, Georgie, and sketch too.'

'I really will,' said Georgie ; 'and you too, Constance?'

'I do not think I have much taste for drawing,' replied Constance ; 'otherwise why should I not draw as well as Agnes and Nellie ? I had lessons, and I do not care to do a thing in which I am not likely to excel.'

'You never sketched from nature,' said Agnes ; 'that is what has got me on so much. It is so very different from copying in the house. Do try it, Constance ; it is worth while to take a little trouble for so delightful an occupation.'

‘Pray keep me company, Constance,’ cried Georgie; ‘I mean to “put my pride in my pocket,” as I have heard Susan say, and submit to being the worst artist of all four.’

‘Well, if I do draw,’ said Constance, ‘I shall come to you, Agnes, for help. Georgie is to be advised by Nellie. You must show me a little, and I will try it for a time. But if I draw anything, I should like it, I think, to be a bit of my dear old home—that old wing. Do you think I could draw that, Agnes?’

‘That is rather difficult, I should say. Suppose you began with a bit of your favourite ruin. There is a very picturesque buttress beside a narrow window at the end of the cloister.’

‘I know it,’ returned Constance; ‘I will begin with that.’

‘Then we must look up our poor forgotten pencils and blocks,’ exclaimed Georgie; ‘I scarcely know where mine are!’

‘I will lend you anything you want,’ said Nellie. ‘You remember what a heap of such things I showed you?’

‘Yes,’ cried Georgie; ‘but I won’t borrow from you, Nellie. I find one never can return your lends, so they turn into gifts; and I don’t like gifts when I can return none. So I thank you all the same, my dear Nellie; but I know that I ought to rummage up my

own possessions, for really mamma did give me all that was necessary, though not such a lavish turn-out as yours.'

'Have you all that you want, Constance?' said Agnes.

'Yes,' she returned very shortly ; and Nellie could not help thinking that Constance feared her making her the same offer as to Georgie. So it was settled that the following day the four artists should meet at the ruin.





CHAPTER X.

Mrs. Walton finds fault with the Conceit displayed by Constance—Nellie takes up the idea that the Lost Will might be found—She makes a vigorous Search for Secret Drawers in her Father's Table—Constance dreads a London Life.

I AM so glad,' said Mrs. Walton, 'to hear that you, Constance, are intending to take up your drawing again. I should have spoken about it before, but I am not so good an instructress as your mamma ; so, as there seems a probability of your being soon again with her, I thought I would let it pass. But if you will work out of doors by yourself, it will be better than any teaching.'

'Indeed I think so,' said Agnes ; 'you say I have improved much, mamma !'

'But remember,' exclaimed Georgie, 'that it is not only the open air and the real landscape that has improved you, Agnes. Nellie has taught you a great deal. I have often heard her saying, "Use that colour ;" "Put this shade first ;" "Take a larger

brush ;” and so on. And, mamma, she is kind enough to promise to help me too !’

‘And are you left out of this instruction, Constance ?’ asked Mrs. Walton.

‘No,’ she replied ; ‘Agnes will help me if I want any help ; but if I do not very soon equal her, I shall not draw at all. I shall let it alone till mamma returns.’

‘Do you seriously mean,’ asked Mrs. Walton, ‘that unless you are the best among all your companions, either in music, drawing, or any other pursuit, that you do not wish to carry it on ?’

‘Yes,’ said Constance ; ‘I cannot bear to be behind others. Certainly I do not expect to do things as well as grown-up people ; but there is no reason why a girl of my own age should do anything better than me.’

‘All people are not gifted in the same way,’ returned Mrs. Walton ; ‘your mother or I might as well say, “We cannot paint like Raphael or Titian, therefore we will not paint at all.” It is but a very mean and narrow mind that cannot admire talent in others without murmuring at our own share.’

‘But do you not think it very disagreeable,’ said Constance, ‘when, perhaps, you have done a drawing as well as you possibly can, to find that another, not better taught and not older, does it a very great deal better ?’

‘I think such a thing should excite you to work hard and do your best, but certainly not to throw up your pursuit in disgust and envy. You surely know that it is our duty to improve to the utmost every talent that we have, however small; and if others surpass us, it is a hindrance to our conceit and pride.’

Constance seemed rather disposed to cry, so Mrs. Walton said no more; but she determined often to talk on the same subject. In the afternoon the three girls set off together, having had a great hunting up of materials. Constance had, after all, applied to Agnes for india rubber, brushes, and various little things; and Agnes thought it best not to remind her that she had declared she had everything she needed. They arrived before Nellie at the ruin, and had seated themselves and arranged their palettes before she arrived running and out of breath.

‘Oh!’ she cried, ‘I have been working so hard since luncheon, that I might not altogether lose you this afternoon.’

‘How is that?’ asked Agnes. ‘I thought you had nothing to do in the afternoon, expressly that you might be out of doors.’

‘That is the case,’ replied Nellie. ‘Mamma arranged all my hours for my reading, and exercises, and music, so that all should be done by one o’clock. But this morning I was so taken up with a project

of mine, that I did nothing before breakfast, or afterwards until nearly twelve ; and mamma would not let me off, because I had engaged to meet you ; but said that, if I chose to idle away the morning, I must make up for it in the afternoon. So, instead of spending a whole hour at luncheon, chattering to papa and mamma, I just took a piece of bread, and went back to my lessons. And I am so tired now that I do not feel inclined to draw.'

'But your project,' asked Georgie ; 'will you not tell us what charming scheme has so occupied you to-day?'

'No,' said Nellie, colouring a little, 'I cannot tell you yet, only that I quite failed this morning in doing what I wanted ; but I mean to try again to-morrow.'

Presently they settled to their drawing, and no more was said of Nellie's morning work, though she afterwards told Agnes, as they walked down the park together. Ever since Nellie had heard about the loss of old Mr. Norland's will, and the consequent change of owners at the Abbey, she had often thought over every possibility that might remain as to recovering it. She admired Constance, and was sensibly touched by the sad and quiet air that always seemed to hang about her. She had often wandered into the empty rooms of the old wing ; but they all were so utterly destitute of any kind of furniture, and the old bookshelves were so unmistakeably empty, that she could

spy nothing there that was the least likely to conceal a box.

One day, whilst sitting beside her father in the small library, she saw him open some inner drawers in the desk, by pushing a small button, which started out the board at the back of the desk.

‘Oh ! papa,’ she exclaimed, ‘what nice little drawers are hidden behind that piece of wood ! What a good plan ! I never should have dreamt of finding drawers there.’

‘And I,’ said her father, laughing, ‘have betrayed my snug hiding-place, where I keep all my notes ; but as I lock the outside of the desk, I am not afraid of even you prying into my secret drawers.’

‘I wonder whether there are any more such secret places in this old table ?’ said Nellie thoughtfully. ‘It is a large, heavy thing ; there might be plenty of room for more. How did you find out those, papa ?’

‘Simply,’ he replied, ‘because I had a large desk with precisely similar drawers ; and when I was arranging my papers here, seeing a knob or button just beside the lock, I tried it, and found this depository. There may be twenty others in the table, for anything I know to the contrary.’

The dinner bell rang at that moment, so Nellie said nothing more ; but, after dreaming of secret drawers all night, she rose early, and went into her

father's study. The little key of the desk he carried on his watch chain ; but the bunch, with the keys of the drawers, was hanging in one of them ; so Nellie pulled out every drawer, piling them carefully on the floor, without shaking the contents. The table was an old-fashioned, heavy library table. There was a raised desk in the centre, beneath which was an opening for the knees of the writer, on each side of which was a set of drawers. At the back were similar drawers on each side, and a closet in the middle, having a set of six small drawers inside it. All of these Nellie took out, and then she began to measure in all directions. She found that there was a space of about three inches between the front and the back drawers when closed ; and she tried in vain to find some knob or bolt which might disclose a secret receptacle there. Then she found that there must be a still larger space between the back of the closet drawers and the opening in the front ; but all her researches were unavailing : she could find no way into these spaces. At last it occurred to her, that if she could see below the table she might then be more sure of the existence of the supposed gaps ; so she called to one of the younger housemaids to assist her, and both their efforts combined were sufficient to turn the table over on its back. Now Nellie could examine it thoroughly ; and, to her infinite disappoint-

ment, she found that there was indeed empty spaces where she had supposed, but without any flooring, or any means of rendering them useful. While she was dolefully contemplating the overturned table, her father entered.

‘Why, Nellie,’ he exclaimed, ‘what extraordinary whim is this? What can you possibly be doing with my table?’

‘Oh! dear papa,’ cried Nellie, ‘I thought to have it all replaced before you came down; but sit heré, and I will soon put all straight again. Help me to turn it over again, Jane. But first, do look, papa. I found, by measuring the outside, that there must be empty spaces in three different parts of the table; and as I could find no way into them, I turned it up, just to see if I was right. Look! what famous secret drawers might have been made in those gaps!’

‘You have a perfect mania for secret drawers, Nellie,’ said her father, laughing; ‘but I shall be glad to see my table on its feet again, and then to arrange the contents of my poor desk.’

Nellie and Jane replaced the table, and then the drawers were carefully put back in their places.

‘There, papa,’ cried Nellie; ‘you will find nothing at all disturbed, at least not in the drawers. I am afraid the desk will be rather upset. If you will unlock it, I will lay all the papers smooth.’

‘I can do that myself,’ said her father ; ‘or no, I think you may as well take the trouble ; but it must be after breakfast.’

‘Very well, papa. And I want, too, to measure the desk inside, for I do believe there must be a secret drawer to it.’

After breakfast they returned to the study, and Mr. Ashby opened the desk. Everything was, of course, in confusion ; but Nellie’s active fingers soon laid papers, envelopes, letters, etc., in good order. Then she measured the depth of the desk, and satisfied herself that there was no receptacle beneath the floor.

‘Now, please to tell me, Nellie,’ said her father, ‘what are you bent upon finding in these secret drawers ? You don’t, surely, take all this trouble for the mere pleasure of finding secret drawers ?’

‘No, certainly,’ returned Nellie, colouring a little ; ‘I wished and expected to find something. I did not wish to say what it was until I had found it ; but you are such a kind papa, that I must tell you.’ So she seated herself on a stool at his feet.

‘You heard, papa, of course, about the strange loss of old Mr. Norland’s will ?’

‘I only heard that as no will was left, or was forthcoming, the eldest nephew of course inherited,’ replied her father.

‘But it was known that there had been a will made

in favour of the younger, and old Mr. Norland kept it in a small leather box. Then, in the removal of his things from that old wing, it must have been mislaid or lost. But no one ever knew of his having destroyed it ; and do not you think it very odd, dear papa, that it was never found ?'

' I know so little of the people or the circumstances,' said her father, ' that I can scarcely judge. It is of course possible that Mr. Norland, supposing the elder nephew to be dead, might have considered the will useless, and so burnt it. Otherwise, I cannot think but that it would have come to light, either in the desk he usually used, or in some of his accustomed lock-ups. Was it to seek for that will that you have made such an upset of all my things this morning ?'

' Yes, papa ; when I saw those little secret drawers yesterday, it occurred to me that the will might have been hidden in just such a place, so I thought I would have a good look ; and I cannot help thinking that still it may be somewhere about the house.'

' Well,' returned her father, ' if you keep up your search with as much energy as you have displayed this morning, you will perhaps come upon it some day. And if you do, do you know the result ?'

' Mr. Frederic Norland would return, and we should have to leave this pretty place, papa ; but though I am very fond of the place, and should be happy

to live here all my life, I do feel it such an injustice that Constance's parents should have been turned out of it, that I think I should be happier if they had it again.'

'So you mean seriously to hunt and rummage in all possible holes and corners,' said her father, as he kissed her. 'Must I wish you success?'

'Yes, papa !' cried Nellie, as she danced out of the room ; 'it is justice, you know.'

Then Nellie went to her lessons, and after drawing with her friends at the ruin, the substance of what had passed in the morning was related to Agnes, with a request that she would on no account tell Constance.

Agnes was much interested in Nellie's search, and most hopeful that she would succeed. 'But,' she said, 'I do not in the least expect, dear Nellie, that you will find it, for you may remember that I told you how Lady Constance searched for it, and you may suppose how eager she must have been, and of course she knew all his usual places for keeping valuable things, and could have left no corner unsearched. But still I heartily wish you success.'

Nellie's father and mother were going out to a dinner party, and Mrs. Walton asked her to spend the evening with them. They could not now stay out quite so late, as the summer was drawing to a close, and autumnal cool began to make itself felt ;

so Nellie brought her work, and they seated themselves, after tea, in the cheerful little drawing-room.

‘Let me see what you are doing,’ said Georgie; ‘I have never yet seen you work, Nellie. Do you excel in that, as well as in everything else?’

Nellie unfolded the piece of black satin which she was embroidering.

‘I engaged to do twelve squares like this,’ said Nellie, laughing, ‘to cover mamma’s drawing-room chairs; but I do not get on quickly: I have only done three besides this.’

‘It is very beautiful,’ cried Georgie; ‘I never saw flowers embroidered in that way. It is finished, is it not?’

‘All but the centre—the little yellow dots in the roses, and the red stamen of the fuchsias. I can put in those without a frame; you see the rest must be done in a frame.’

‘Are these done from a common canvas pattern?’ asked Mrs. Walton.

‘No,’ Nellie replied; ‘mamma makes me a sketch of a group of flowers for a pattern; I am stupid enough not to be able to work from real flowers, as she does. I must show you, some day, what beautiful work mamma has done in this kind of way.’

Constance had drawn near to look at the flowers.

‘Do you admire them, Constance?’ said Agnes, rather mischievously.

‘Yes,’ Constance said; ‘I think they are lovely, and I wish I had been able to do such a piece as that for mamma, instead of this white embroidery, which is quite common.’

‘If you like it,’ said Nellie, ‘I should be so glad to show you the way that I shade these flowers; it is quite simple—once showing would be sufficient.’

‘Thank you,’ said Constance; ‘but mamma will be at home now before I should have leisure to finish anything so large.’

‘Is Lady Constance then returning from the West Indies?’ asked Nellie.

‘Yes,’ Constance said, ‘I had a letter this afternoon, telling me that papa and mamma think of returning in about a month.’

Nellie felt a little puzzled, for Constance looked grave, and Agnes said—

‘You are surprised that Constance does not seem delighted at the idea of seeing her mother so soon; but it will be so different to welcoming them to Norland Abbey, that Constance feels all the distress of having lost it again.’

‘We are to live in London always,’ said Constance; ‘and I am sure I shall hate it, and so will mamma. Fancy a dark, dusty street, instead of the beautiful trees: no garden, no flowers, no carriage; it will be dreadful!’

‘Do not say so,’ said Nellie kindly; ‘I dare say

you will find many things to be pleasant and interesting, though of a very different kind ; and being with your father and mother will make up for a great deal, will it not ?’

‘ Oh, certainly, that will be a happiness to be with them,’ said Constance. ‘ But to see my dear papa working all day at that wearisome law, instead of enjoying his own beautiful place !’ And Constance threw herself in her favourite sofa corner, and began to cry.

‘ You must forgive my speaking to you before Nellie,’ said Mrs. Walton ; ‘ but really, Constance, I must reprove you for the mistaken way in which you are grieving over your mother’s letter. She makes no complaint herself, but anticipates her London life with content ; and you should feel nothing but happiness and thankfulness that your parents are returning in health from a very dangerous climate. I feel quite ashamed of your repining and ingratitude.’

These words only caused more tears from Constance, and Agnes began to talk of other things to Nellie. They worked a little, played the last new pieces they had learned ; and after spending a very pleasant evening, Nellie returned home, more than ever full of pity for Constance, and stedfastly determined to have another sharp search after the mysterious leather box.



CHAPTER XI.

Search in the old-fashioned Furniture — Nellie's respect for Ancestry—She keeps her Plan a Secret—Early Work—Constance goes in Nellie's Carriage to see Mrs. Brand—Hears that her Parents return in Three Weeks—Nellie's Search is fruitless, so far.

NELLIE thought incessantly of where it might have been possible for old Mr. Norland to have placed the missing box, or the paper without the box. She wished that she could have talked to Constance about it, as then she could have learned many little details about the old man that might have helped her : where he used chiefly to sit ; where he used to write ; and if he had the habit of putting away papers in books. ' If so,' thought Nellie, ' I may spend a good deal of time in hunting through every leaf of all the hundreds of books in the library ; but first I will examine well his bedroom, both in the new house and the old wing.' This bedroom was now considered a spare room : it had been left exactly as it was when Lady Constance and Mr.

Norland left ; and Nellie thought, as she looked round it, that the old-fashioned, comfortable furniture was most probably the very same that old Mr. Norland had used. There was a capacious leather arm-chair beside the fireplace, a round table close to it, with drawers, a tall candlestand, and a reading-desk fixed at the side of the chimney-piece. The dressing-table in the middle of the room was also very old-fashioned. It had a mirror attached, and many little cupboards and oddly-shaped drawers. 'I will give that a good rummage,' said Nellie to herself; and then she looked about in vain for some other probable hiding-place. There were no closets in the room, no shelves. Nellie decided in her own mind that she would rise very early and carry on her search before the hour for her lessons, so that during the rest of the day nothing should be disarranged. When Nellie made up her mind to do anything thoroughly, she generally carried out her intention fully ; and the following morning she completely ransacked table and dressing-table, carefully felt the cushions and stuffing of the old chair, and convinced herself that no small box or roll of paper was to be found in that room. In the afternoon the three girls from the Lodge came to ask her to walk ; and they had a long stroll through the wooded part of the park. The trees were just beginning to change colour, and were



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best home always before her.' 'I wish I had any news for her on that score,' said Nellie; 'but I have not succeeded yet; and how provoking it will be should I really find the will, just after Mr. Brand has taken a house for them!'

‘Do you really imagine that you will find it?’ said Agnes, smiling. ‘I have not myself the smallest idea that you will do so. I say this because I feel such confidence in Lady Constance. Just think, Nellie, what was at stake with her! Can you for a moment suppose that she did not thoroughly examine every corner?’

‘It is difficult to do so,’ said Nellie thoughtfully ; ‘but for all that I have a conviction, an idea that I shall find the will. To-morrow I mean to examine

the bedroom in the old wing that Mr. Norland inhabited ; and then I shall ransack the library again. I mean to spend two hours in this search every morning, Agnes ; and if I don't find it, I think I shall go out of my senses !'

'How strong an idea you have taken up about it !' exclaimed Agnes, laughing. 'And you have been so little intimate with Constance, that I almost wonder how you can feel such anxiety about her welfare.'

'You know,' said Nellie, 'I have always pitied her very much. It was so unnatural a thing turning out the good nephew for the bad ; and then I always feel an interloper here. Much as I love and admire the place, I shall be happier elsewhere. There is Lady Constance's picture, it always has reproachful eyes for me ; and all the old family things, ornaments, and furniture. Although I am of no family myself, Agnes, and can boast of no ancestors whatever, I have the greatest possible respect and veneration for the fine old races of English country gentlemen. I cannot bear to hear of estates being sold to rich *parvenus* like ourselves.'

'It is odd,' said Agnes, 'that you should thus feel. I had always imagined that those who had made their own fortune, like your father, must feel a sort of contempt for people who inherited from father to son without any merit or work of their own.'

‘It is often so, I believe,’ replied Nellie. ‘I think that my mother even has that sort of feeling ; but my father understands my reverence for ancestry. Oh ! I should have made a first-rate aristocrat, I assure you, as far as feelings go. Why do you look at me so, Agnes?’

‘You said, “as far as feelings go,”’ said Agnes. ‘Do you suppose that you would not always be considered a lady in manners, in education and habits, as well as in feelings?’

‘No,’ said Nellie bluntly. ‘I see well enough what a difference there is between me and you two, and between me and Constance ; and all the more it hurts me that she should lose her rightful place, and that I, by the merest chance, should slip into it.’

‘What are you preaching about so earnestly?’ cried Georgie, waiting till Agnes and Nellie joined them. ‘I have heard your voices becoming so loud and eager, and wondered what was interesting you so much. Pray, let us hear.’

‘No, you cannot hear,’ said Nellie, smiling ; ‘rather tell us what has occupied your tongues all this time.’

‘A very large theme,’ cried Georgie, “London.” I have been trying to persuade Constance that she will find an immense number of things to delight and interest her ; for she has never been in London. And I expect, when she has lived there for a year or two, she will no longer regret a quiet country life.’

‘I cannot chime in with you at all,’ replied Nellie ;
‘I do not believe any one accustomed to the country would ever like London. But I sincerely think that Constance will be happy with her parents wherever they are.’

‘Certainly I shall,’ returned Constance ; ‘and I am rather glad that autumn and winter are coming, for I believe I shall miss the trees and the flowers much less in winter-time than in summer. Oh ! the summer in London must be dreadful. I shall envy you then, Agnes !’

‘You must all come and visit us in summer-time,’ said Georgie ; ‘we can manage to squeeze you all in.’

‘I should think,’ returned Constance, ‘that papa will never like to come here again. Were I in his place, nothing should induce me to set my foot in this park. No, no, London rather than that, to see it filled by others.’

‘Come, Constance,’ said Georgie, ‘do not begin any more on that sad subject. I believe Nellie is as sorry as you are to be filling your place ; but it is not very civil in you to talk in this way before her.’

‘I am sorry I did so,’ exclaimed Constance ; ‘of course I know that Nellie had no hand in it. Let us talk of something else.’

‘How sorry I am,’ said Nellie, ‘to see the leaves begin to fade ! I wonder whether I shall like this

place as well in winter as I do now! I am not accustomed to the country in winter.'

'Oh,' cried Georgie, 'this is lovely in winter! There is generally ice for a long time on the pond, and we slide and have a little sledge. Then the bare trees look splendid with frost or a little sprinkle of snow all over them. I do like winter! And in the house it is a great deal more comfortable than summer.'

'Yes,' returned Nellie, 'the evening in winter-time is, I think, much more comfortable than summer, as there is a nice fire, and all snugly shut up and warm. We may as well persuade ourselves that it is much nicer, because very soon we shall have to face it. I will not walk down to the Lodge to-day, so good-bye.' And leaving her at the hall door, the three girls returned home.

The next morning Nellie pursued her plan of going to the bedroom in the old wing. The morning was damp, and when she had unlocked the outer door of the building she felt quite a shiver come over her. 'How gloomy and sad a deserted house is!' she thought. 'I am half inclined to go back again. But there is Mr. Brand soon going up to take their house for them. I must lose no time.' So she ran up the dusty stairs into the largest bedroom, over the drawing-room. She had come to the conclusion that this

had been the one occupied by the old man, simply because it was the best ; the others were, in fact, almost too small to have contained the cumbrous bed, dressing-table, etc., that were now in the modern house. There was little scope here for Nellie's active researches, for the room was positively empty, a wide low window-seat in each window, which lifted up, forming a large hollow space or box beneath, being the only receptacle for anything. These contained only cobwebs and dust !

'Well,' thought Nellie, 'as my search here is already concluded, I may as well look into the library.' And she went down. She went into one of the turret rooms. There were no closets there, only a little torn paper on the floor. She took up some of the bits. 'I declare,' she said softly, 'that I will look at every one of these scraps; and as I do so I will put them all in a heap in the large room.' Down she sat on the floor, collected all the torn paper in her lap, and looked at every bit. All was printed, so it was soon gone through ; and carrying the heap in her frock, she deposited it in one corner of the library. Next she went to the other turret, and carried on the same operation. While finishing the few last scraps, she heard the clock strike eight ; so she rose to go. It was quite pleasant to leave the close atmosphere of the shut-up room, and to feel the cool

fresh air, and still pleasanter to sit down in her own comfortable schoolroom, where she worked at a different kind of occupation till breakfast-time.

‘Well, Nellie,’ said her father, as she entered the breakfast-room, ‘how goes on the search? I half expected to see all the books in the library on the floor this morning. Where have you bestowed yourself these two days?’

‘Yesterday, papa,’ replied Nellie, ‘I bestowed myself in the large spare room, formerly occupied by old Mr. Norland, and to-day I have been in the old wing, looking over the torn papers on the turret floors.’

‘You really are entering into it,’ returned her father, ‘in a desperate way. Let me know when I am to look out for another house.’

‘Ah! you may laugh now,’ cried Nellie; ‘but you won’t laugh when I hold up to you the real will, or the little leather box. I mean to find it, I assure you.’

‘Have you enrolled your mother in these searches and hopes?’ asked Mr. Ashby.

‘No, papa,’ Nellie replied demurely. ‘Mamma is not very fond of Constance, and I could not expect her to sympathize in my strong feeling in the matter. Time enough, papa, when I have the box safe!’

‘Quite so,’ said her father with an incredulous face; ‘and now to breakfast.’

Nellie got through her lessons in a mechanical sort of way, for the mind was incessantly dwelling on the will and the sad consequences of its loss.

‘I wonder,’ she thought, ‘if Constance will love me if I really should find it, and so be the means of restoring her to her dear home. I shall then have done one piece of good work in my life.’ She went down to the Lodge in the afternoon, and found the whole party in the house.

‘You lazy girls,’ Nellie exclaimed, ‘you have not yet been out this lovely autumn day! Only think, I was dressed and out at six o’clock this morning!’

‘Out at six o’clock!’ cried Georgie. ‘What were you doing? I only began to get up at six this morning.’

‘What I was doing is a secret,’ said Nellie. ‘Some day you will know perhaps; and if I fail in what I want, you will never know.’

‘Never!’ said Georgie, laughing; ‘that will be a terrible mystery to me, especially as I am sure you told Agnes the other day when you walked together—did you not?’

‘Yes,’ replied Nellie; ‘but you need not be jealous of Agnes; she is not such a fly-away thing as you. Many secrets will be confided to your sister that you won’t hear, Miss Curious.’

‘I suppose I must put up with it,’ said Georgie,

laughing ; 'but supposing you do succeed in your mysterious doings, when are we to hear the news?'

'The very moment I do succeed,' cried Nellie; 'that is, I shall run down here immediately.'

'Now I shall be watching for you all day,' said Georgie ; 'it is a pity I ever heard of the mystery.'

'I think it is almost a pity,' said Nellie ; 'and if I quite fail, I shall be sorry that I told any one, even Agnes. Will you walk up the park with me? or is it too late? Well, then, I shall see you to-morrow.' And away went Nellie.

True to her resolution, she rose early the following morning, and went again to the old wing. She soon finished examining the papers in the second turret, and then she went to the book closets, of which there were three ; she began at once upon the heap of rubbish on the floor. As she examined the papers, she placed them in a little heap at her side.

'How very extraordinary it would be,' she thought, 'if really Mr. Fred Norland should recover his estate by means of a scrap of paper or parchment picked up by chance on this floor by me, a perfect stranger to him ; and yet it may happen !'

As there were many written papers here, and even some bits of parchment, it required more care to look at them all ; and Nellie had only just cleared out the last bit, when eight o'clock sounded in her ears.

‘Is it possible,’ she cried, starting up, ‘that I have been here almost an hour and a half? Now there are two more closets to clear out, and then I must take to the bookshelves in the new library.’

Nellie began to feel doubtful, there remained so few places to search, and she returned to the house rather more soberly than she had set out. Again the same work on the following day, when the second closet was searched, that is, all the torn paper on the floor, with the same bad success.

‘Now I have only one more,’ thought Nellie, looking dolefully at the heap of paper and old books that she had accumulated on the floor of the library; ‘but there are drawers and shelves, and one or two little cupboards in all these closets. I will turn them all out next.’

She looked at them all in turn. There were two or three drawers nearest the floor, over these six bookshelves, and then a small cupboard, with double doors. This did not quite reach to the ceiling, and on the top of it lay, in one closet, several large books, and in the others a pile of old newspapers.

‘I do not know how I can reach to the top of these cupboards,’ said Nellie to herself, ‘unless the shelves will bear my weight; but I will finish first with the scraps on the floor.’

This day they drove to see Mrs. Brand. Agnes

begged Constance to go, and Nellie was as much surprised as pleased to see her come out with Georgie, when her little equipage stopped at the Lodge gate.

‘At last,’ she cried, ‘you will honour me and “Emperor!” Now, Georgie, you must give this seat to Constance, and go behind us.’

‘I thank you for taking me,’ said Constance ; ‘but I must tell you that I very particularly wanted to see Mrs. Brand, as I shall hear about the house that papa has asked him to take. So I confess that it was not entirely to drive with you that I came.’

‘I am glad to see you in my carriage for any reason,’ said Nellie, laughing, ‘and I am glad to be of use to you. Are you beginning to look forward with some degree of pleasure to your home in London?’

‘I try only to think of papa and mamma there,’ replied Constance. ‘I dare not think of my only home being in a crowded city.’

Georgie was leaning on the back of their seat listening with a much amused countenance.

‘What are you laughing at?’ said Constance, catching sight of her merry face, ‘or just going to laugh at? What pleases you so much?’

‘I am amused to hear you and Nellie at last conversing in a friendly way,’ said Georgie. ‘I believe you have never spoken two words to her before.’

Constance coloured, for she felt that she had been

repulsive and rude to the kind-hearted girl who sat beside her, and she was relieved when Georgie went on—

‘And now you have once begun, I should not wonder that you became great friends. Don’t make me jealous of you, Constance; I won’t have Nellie fonder of you than of me, for I always liked her from the very first day.’

‘Thank you for that,’ said Nellie; ‘I like to be liked. But Constance will have no time now to like me, for she is going away so soon. So you and Agnes must keep all my liking for yourselves. Here we are at the Rectory.’

Mrs. Brand was at home, so they all went in.

‘I congratulate you, dear Constance,’ said Mrs. Brand, when she had welcomed them; ‘you will soon have the pleasure of seeing your parents again.’

‘Yes,’ replied Constance; ‘I came over partly to ask you if you would tell me what they said about the time, for you only wrote in your note to Mrs. Walton that papa had begged Mr. Brand to take a house for him immediately, and mamma said to me that she hoped to set off by the next ship?’

‘That was the very word used in our letter; and as about a month is the usual passage, and it is a week since we received those letters, I imagine that they have already started, and are now on the way, probably will be here in about three weeks.’

‘Really! so soon?’ said Constance, colouring with pleasure. ‘You mean they will land in three weeks at Falmouth or Portsmouth. Then is Mr. Brand going directly to take a house in London?’

‘He had thought of going to-day,’ replied Mrs. Brand; ‘but some unexpected business will prevent his doing so for another week. However, that will be quite soon enough; there is no difficulty in finding a house in London.’

‘I should like,’ said Constance, ‘to have gone up with Mr. Brand, and to have been there to receive them.’

‘That is very polite and very friendly,’ cried Georgie, ‘to be in such a hurry to leave us, after we have done our best for you all these months. Don’t flatter yourself that they will be in such a great hurry to see you; they will settle themselves in London, and then come down to fetch you.’

‘Though I do not agree that they will be in no hurry to see Constance,’ said Mrs. Brand, ‘still I think your plan will be very probable. I hope, Constance, that your father and mother will be our guests here for a week or two as soon as they arrive.’

‘Oh! do you think they will come here?’ exclaimed Constance. ‘I should have thought nothing could have induced papa to come near his old home, his

own beautiful home, to see it possessed by—' She stopped short as her eyes fell upon Nellie.

'Upon such very unworthy successors,' said Nellie, finishing her sentence for her; 'do not fear to say so. I feel it as much as you do, Constance.'

'Then I do not!' cried Georgie. 'I should say let Mr. Norland come, and see what very excellent, kind, and good possessors fill his place, and then he will go away happier.'

'I was not going to say anything against you, Nellie,' said Constance softly; 'I know you have been very kind and forbearing towards me. I was only going to say that I thought it would hurt my father to see the Abbey in the hands of those who had no real right to it. Do you understand?'

'Perfectly,' Nellie answered, smiling; 'you think he would have felt it less, if your Cousin Oliver had remained.'

'I am truly thankful that he did not,' said Mrs. Brand. 'So, Constance, the news that I have for you is, that I expect your father and mother will land in about three weeks, will go straight to the London house, arrange things there to their own taste, and then will come here to visit us, and to take you from the good hands of Mrs. Walton.'

'And Mr. Brand does not go up to town for a week?' asked Nellie, as they rose to go. 'Well,'

she thought, 'that gives me a little time to carry on my rummage. How grand it would be if I could stop their going at all to London !'. Nellie was very thoughtful on the way home ; and Constance, thinking that she had felt her rudeness, exerted herself a little to talk to her. Nellie had never seen her so pleasant, and the drive seemed unusually short. The following morning found Nellie at work on the floor of the third closet. Every piece of paper had at last been carefully looked at ; and Nellie, with a sigh of foreboding failure, went to the first closet again. She pulled out the lowest drawer, it was full of old account books ; so she quietly sat down to turn them all over, every leaf. Then they were added to the pile outside. The next drawer took less time, for there were only a few books there, and several old newspapers. The six shelves were utterly bare. Nellie stepped on the lowest, and holding by the upper ones, tried to open the doors of the small cupboard. They were locked. Nellie sprang to the ground. 'Oh for the key !' she cried aloud, 'it may be on the bunch ;' and she flew to the outer door, where she had left the keys hanging. Seizing them, she ran back, and clambered up the empty shelves. Holding herself up by one hand, she tried the keys with the other. No ! they were all too large, and Nellie flung them on the floor in vexation. Very likely, she thought, there may be another

bunch in papa's desk, but I cannot go now to bother him. I will fetch my turnscrew and burst it open. Away she went ; it struck eight as she entered her own room, but she was too eager to notice it ; and, taking the turnscrew out of the drawer of useful tools that she kept for her own especial use, she returned to the old library. Climbing up again, she applied the tool with such good will, that she soon wrenched open the little door. It contained two shelves, completely empty ! Nellie slowly came down ; she could almost have cried ; but looking up again to the offending cupboard, she saw that there were still the books on the top to fetch down.

‘That must be for to-morrow,’ she said, as she moved away. ‘I am too much disappointed to-day to look further ; for I felt sure it must be in that little closet.’ And Nellie slowly returned to the house.





CHAPTER XII.

Nellie searches every Morning—Constance feels happy at the idea of seeing her Parents—Nellie finds the Leather Box containing the Will—Drive to Mr. Peters—Visit to Mr. Brand—Constance's Joy—Removal to The Firs—Return of Mr. Norland and Lady Constance.



THOROUGHLY wet day ensued, so Nellie could not go out ; and she passed the afternoon with her mother in the drawing - room, working at her flower embroidery. The great object of her day now was her search ; and she got up the following morning as so much a matter of habit, that she could not help smiling at herself.

‘ If I do find the will,’ she said to herself, ‘ I shall not know what to do with myself in the early morning. But then we shall have to move, to leave this place, so everything would be different ; and how sorry I shall be to live here no longer ! Her first work that morning was to climb up the shelves, and pull down the books that lay on the top of the cupboard. There

was a large Bible and Prayer-book, an old lexicon, and a few odd volumes of magazines. In lifting these down, Nellie perceived that the cupboard was very shallow, and did not reach so far back as the shelves below it. She mounted a shelf or two higher, so that she could stretch her arm over the top of the cupboard. There was a vacant space behind it. 'I must feel to the bottom of that,' said Nellie aloud; 'though, I believe, I shall tumble down if I climb any higher.' She ventured upon another shelf, and, thrusting her hand down to the bottom of the space, pulled forth one book. She flung it on the floor, and then descended from her perch in order to examine her spoil.

'It will take an endless time,' she thought, 'to turn over all these books leaf by leaf; I will hold them together by the two sides turned back, and shake them well.' A few pieces of paper fell out under this process. They were only extracts or accounts; and Nellie having well shaken them all, went to the next closet. Drawers and shelves and cupboard were in the same manner turned out and examined.

'Two more days will finish all I can do in this old wing,' thought Nellie, as she heard eight o'clock; 'then I have no resource left but the new library. It will take me at least a month to look well through

that ; and I shall certainly go crazy if, after all, I do not find it.'

'What news, Nellie?' said her father as she came in to breakfast.


'No good news, papa. In a day or two I am going to do a great deal in the library. I suppose, dear papa, you will allow me to do what I like there, on condition that I replace everything before luncheon-time. I say so because very likely some mornings I may not have all straight by nine. And as you never sit there in the morning, and no visitors are likely to come till afternoon, I think you may safely make that condition.'

'You know you generally have your own way,' said her father ; 'but I will indulge you as usual, on condition that I see no litter after one o'clock.'

'What are you going to do in the library, Nellie,' asked her mother, 'as you have a room of your own beside the drawing-room? I do not know why you should ever go into the library.'

'Mamma,' replied Nellie, 'I am going to look a great deal into the books ; but my object in doing so is a little secret that I beg you to let me keep for a while.'

'With all my heart,' said her mother. 'You know I do not take much interest in books, so I can patiently wait for your secret. Are you going to walk or drive with your young friends this afternoon?'



‘Georgie wanted me to take a ride with her,’ said Nellie, laughing ; ‘but I feel much safer and happier on my own feet, or in my dear little carriage. I think, mamma, you ought to take a drive with me ; you have never yet ventured with me and “Emperor.”’

‘I say as you say,’ replied her mother ; ‘I feel much safer in a large, solid carriage, with a steady coachman to drive me. I never was fond of those little low carriages, that seem quite on the ground, and as if everything would drive over one.’

‘Then I think, mamma,’ said Nelly, ‘that I shall garden to-day, and not go farther. I see many little things in those borders that I should like to do myself.’

Constance, meantime, was in much excitement at the idea of so soon seeing her father and mother. She practised regularly and earnestly, hoping to surprise her mother by her progress. She drew every day, and worked hard at all her lessons. And from constantly talking of London, and all that was to be done there, she began to feel less dread of the town home. Agnes advised her not to think at all about the Abbey.

‘I believe,’ said Constance, ‘I had better not go up to the ruin again. I could not bear to feel that I was seeing it for the last time.’

‘You will have to go up at once,’ said Georgie,

‘to say good-bye to Nellie, and Mr. and Mrs. Ashby.’

‘Oh ! must I, indeed !’ returned Constance. ‘But you know mamma will be here before I go, if she comes to Mrs. Brand’s ; so she will go with me, if I have to go : then I shall not care so much, perhaps.’

‘I wonder what is become of Nellie these two days !’ cried Georgie ; ‘it seems quite a long time since we saw her. If she does not come this afternoon, or send any message, we must go to-morrow, Agnes, and look after her.’

But no Nellie arrived that day. The next found her, as usual, in the old library. Her first proceeding was to clamber up the shelves in the closet, that she had almost cleared the night before, and to pull down the pile of old newspapers that lay on the top of the cupboard. They all fell down in a heap on the floor.

‘While I am perched up here,’ she thought, ‘I may as well feel in that gap behind the cupboard.’ So she made a great stretch, and thrust her hand down. She felt something that she supposed was a book ; and, dragging it out, was about to fling it down upon the newspapers, when she saw that it was bound with metal, that it had a lid and a lock. It was a small box.

Almost falling headlong, in her haste to descend, she reached the floor, and flew to the window. Yes,

it was a small leather box, with ornamented corners, hinges, and lock of steel. Nellie became quite giddy. She was obliged to sit down on one of her heaps of rubbish ; but in a second more she was flying along the path, through the hall, and up the stairs to her father's dressing-room. She burst in without ceremony, gasping, 'The box ! the box ! Oh ! dear papa, I have actually found it ! Look ! this is it—"A small leather box." The will, of course, is inside it. Do, dear papa, open it quickly !' And Nellie laid her head and the box together on her father's knee, half sobbing and half laughing.

'My dear child,' he said quietly, 'do not put yourself into such an excitement. What makes you think this is the lost "Will" box ? and where did you find it ?'

'I found it, papa,' said Nellie, 'behind a little cupboard in one of the book-closets in the old library. I can imagine it was set on the top, as a nice safe place ; and when somebody squeezed in a whole pile of newspapers, this box was pushed down behind. What other small leather box, papa, was likely to be there ? and that was the room he always sat in when the will was made. Mr. Ashby examined the box carefully.'

'One thing is certain, Nellie,' he said, 'that it is firmly locked with an excellent lock. Where are we


to find the key? And supposing we do find the key, would it not be better to send for Mr. Norland's lawyer, and desire him to open it, and take charge of this slippery will, if indeed it is in the box? Supposing it were empty!

'Oh! papa,' exclaimed Nellie, springing up, and stamping her foot impatiently, 'do not suppose such disagreeable things. But yes, let us go directly with it to Mr. Peters at Barnley. I know that is the man, because they thought he might have had the will when it was first missed.'

'But, my dear,' said her father, 'I am not half shaved. Let me finish dressing, and let us breakfast, then I will consider whether to send a note to Mr. Peters, or to drive over.'

'Oh! papa,' cried Nellie, 'it is not nearly eight o'clock yet; how can I wait till past nine, before you even decide what to do? I shall be quite wild! Please, dear papa, make haste and dress, and let me order your breakfast at eight, and then let us start directly. Please,' she repeated, with her hand on the lock, 'I will go and order the dog-cart to be ready in half an hour.'

Mr. Ashby smiled at her impatience; and Nellie, taking the smile for consent, flew away, carrying the precious box tightly under her arm. First, she ordered the breakfast to be prepared immediately; then she



ran out to the stables, and begged the coachman to have the dog-cart made ready as fast as possible. Then she rushed upstairs again to her mother's room. Mrs. Ashby was still in bed.

'Mamma !' exclaimed Nellie, tearing back the curtain, 'I have found something that may be of the greatest consequence ; and papa and I are going to drive into Barnley immediately, to see Mr. Norland's lawyer about it. So, dear mamma, you will have to breakfast alone to-day ; but we shall soon be back, and then you shall hear all particulars.' And, feeling that she had not patience then to explain all, she kissed her mother and ran away again. She did not wait long for her father, and instantly set before him his cup of coffee.

'You are a dear, good papa,' she cried, 'to make such haste. Now, confess that you are in as much curiosity almost as I am, to see the contents of this important box !'

'I have some curiosity, I confess,' said Mr. Ashby ; 'and I am highly diverted at the fact of your having groped out this mystery, when those to whom it was of such vital consequence overlooked it. But still, I think it quite possible that this may not be the right box, and even then the will may not be in it.'

'Oh ! papa, don't say such a thing. Look at it, with its queer, old-fashioned hinges and lock. It has

"Lost Will" written on every inch of it. And if you had seen the place it was in ! I do not wonder that Lady Constance did not climb up to the top of the bookshelves, and thrust her arm into a place full of cobwebs and dust. Now you are ready, are you not ? May I fetch all the bunches of small keys out of your desk ?'

'I will get them,' replied her father, 'whilst you get your hat ; for you do not intend to drive to Barnley bareheaded, do you ?' Nellie laughed.

'I had indeed forgotten,' she said, 'what a dirty figure I am ; but I will not be two minutes ;' and before five had elapsed, she was seated beside her father, driving down the park. It was about half-an-hour's drive in the light dog-cart with its strong swift horse. Mr. Peters looked rather amazed at the sight of visitors, just as he was sitting down to his breakfast.

'We shall not detain you above a few minutes, I believe,' said Mr. Ashby. 'My daughter has found a small leather box, which she imagines to be the same which was supposed to contain old Mr. Norland's will, and which could not be found when Mr. Oliver arrived at home.'

Nellie produced her treasure.

'I recognise the box !' exclaimed Mr. Peters. 'Yes, that is the very box in which the will was once

locked. Bless me ! it will be singular should it still be there. But who has the key ?'

'I brought with me,' said Mr. Ashby, 'a quantity of small keys that were left in the library drawers, thinking it might be among them. If it is not, I shall leave it to your discretion whether it is proper to break the lock.'

'I think,' replied Mr. Peters, 'that I should be justified in doing so, for the will may no longer be there, and it would be unreasonable to bring home Mr. Norland only on the supposition. And if it is there, Mr. Oliver is no longer the possessor.'

Nellie, with trembling hands, turned over the bunches of keys, selecting all she thought looked most likely. After trying at least a dozen, one fitted, which smoothly opened the lock.

'Here it is !' cried Mr. Peters, drawing out a folded parchment ; 'the very will that I drew up for him myself, and saw him sign. Norland Abbey belongs to Mr. Frederic Norland ! Am I to congratulate you, Miss Ashby, on this discovery ? You appear to be pleased with the result.'

'Pleased !' cried Nellie, 'I never was so happy in my life. I had a conviction all along that I should find it. You are quite sure, Mr. Peters, that it is the right will ?'

Mr. Peters unfolded the parchment, showing her

the commencement : ' I give and bequeath to my dear nephew, Frederic Norland, entirely and unreservedly, the whole of the estate entitled Norland Abbey.'

Nellie started up. ' Now, dear papa,' she exclaimed, ' you will come with me round by the South Lodge, to show this box and its contents to poor Constance.'


' I thought, my dear,' said her father, ' that it would be best to leave the box here with Mr. Peters, and let him communicate with both the Mr. Norlands, for it really is not my business to meddle with the affair.'

' But oh ! papa,' cried Nellie, ' pray let me show it to Constance, and then, if you like, I will drive over myself this afternoon to give it to Mr. Peters' charge ; and it is quite useless to write to Mr. Fred Norland, because he is on the voyage home. It would be better to let Mr. Brand know, because he is going next week to take a house in London for Mr. Norland.'

' Then I should say,' observed Mr. Peters, ' that it would be well Mr. Brand should know of the existence of this will.'

' Then let me take it, papa, first to Constance and then to Mr. Brand. Afterwards we will give it to Mr. Peters' safe keeping. You know, papa, I found it, so I have a right to say a little about it.'

' But suppose, my dear,' said her father, ' that you were to lose it ? It was found in my house—mine for the time being,—and I should incur very just blame



if I allowed my daughter to run about the country with it, and lose it !'

'Then, sir,' said Mr. Peters good-naturedly, 'if you will allow me to take my breakfast, I will, if you please, accompany you to the South Lodge, as Miss Ashby seems so anxious to show the box to her young friend, who certainly is a party deeply interested.'

'Thank you, Mr. Peters,' cried Nellie, clapping her hands, 'that is very kind of you ; and I will promise to drive you home again ; or perhaps you will go on to Mr. Brand's, and show it to him too !'

'Pray do,' said Mr. Ashby. 'I would much rather not appear at all in the matter. There, give him the box, my dear Nellie ; you have done with it now. Take your breakfast, sir ; I will read the newspaper meantime.'

Mr. Peters was not long over the meal, and then they took their way to the Lodge.

'Sit in front, Mr. Peters,' said Nellie ; 'the back seat is very small ;' and she mounted before he had time to remonstrate.

'Now,' said Mr. Ashby, as they stopped before Mrs. Walton's door, 'I will walk home, and leave the dog-cart at your service ; and when you have seen Constance and Mr. Brand, my dear Nellie, and have taken Mr. Peters home again, I suppose I shall hear how your friends took the news. Good-bye.'

Nellie rang the bell.

‘You will let me carry it in and show it to Constance,’ she said, taking the box from Mr. Peters’ hands.

‘Perhaps you would rather go in alone,’ said Mr. Peters. ‘I will trust you for a few minutes.’


‘Thank you!’ cried Nellie; and she hastily entered, leaving Mr. Peters seated in the carriage. Nellie tapped at the drawing-room door, and then peeped in. They were all three looking at some new music just arrived.

‘Nellie!’ exclaimed Georgie, ‘we seldom see you so early; I am delighted. But what is the matter? You look as if you had something to tell.’

‘So I have,’ cried Nellie, ‘a wonderful thing to tell. If Constance will sit by me, I will tell her, for it concerns her.’

‘Is it possible,’ cried Agnes, ‘that you have succeeded?’

‘You shall hear,’ said Nellie, seating herself on the sofa. ‘I must tell you, Constance, that I have always had a sort of idea that the missing will, which left all to your father, was somewhere; and I have been so grieved for you, and though you would not like me, I thought of little else. So lately I determined to search thoroughly, and I have groped into every corner of that old wing. I will tell you some day about my



early morning searches. And this morning, at the back of an old cupboard—'

Constance had flushed and turned pale whilst Nellie was speaking, and now she almost screamed, 'You don't mean that you have found it? Speak, speak, Nellie! You have found the will?'

'I found a little old-fashioned leather box, fast locked ;' and Nellie produced the box from beneath her jacket.

'And the key!' cried Georgie.

'Papa would not try to open it himself,' replied Nellie; 'but he was so good, he made haste and drove me and the box over to Mr. Peters, and he unlocked it; and here, just as you see, is the parchment will.' She unfolded it, and showed them the beginning. Constance's dazzled eyes caught the words, 'To my dear nephew, Frederic Norland ;' and, flinging her arms round Nellie's neck, she burst into tears saying, or rather trying to say—

'Oh! Nellie, have you indeed thought so kindly of me? Forgive me my naughty, my wicked behaviour to you.'

'My dear Constance,' said Mrs. Walton, 'let us hear a little more. What did your father think should be done about this strangely recovered will?'

'Papa put it entirely into Mr. Peters' hands. And

oh ! poor Mr. Peters is waiting outside all this time in the dog-cart.'

'My dear,' exclaimed Mrs. Walton, 'how rude he must think us ! Go, Agnes, and beg him to come in.' Agnes soon brought in Mr. Peters.

'As there was such important news to tell,' he said, 'I quite expected to sit there for some time. And I must now congratulate you, Miss Norland, on this most happy discovery. And you too, madam,' turning to Mrs. Walton, 'this must give you great pleasure, as the friend of Lady Constance.'

'I can scarcely yet believe it,' said Mrs. Walton. 'It is indeed singular that Lady Constance and her husband should in vain have sought for this very box ; and but for your active hands, dear Nellie, it would certainly have remained where it was, until that old wing might have been pulled down.'

'And all that time—for years,' cried Constance, 'poor papa would have been working hard in London, and mamma and I miserable ! Oh ! Nellie, we owe you everything.'

'I agreed with Mr. Ashby,' said Mr. Peters, 'that it would be well to show this to Mr. Brand, as it seems he was about to take a house in town for Mr. Norland, and this news might make a difference in Mr. Brand's proceedings. So I thought Miss Ashby

would accompany me to the Vicarage, for she seems unwilling to lose sight of her treasure.'

'Will you come with us, Constance,' said Nellie, 'and hear what Mr. Brand says?'

'I think,' interposed Mrs. Walton, 'that Constance is in far too excited a state to go with you; and I am sure she will be glad to hear from you, Nellie, what they say and propose at the Vicarage.'

'May I go, mamma?' whispered Georgie; 'I shall so enjoy seeing Mr. Brand's surprise.'

'Please,' added Nellie; and Georgie, receiving a nod, ran off for her hat, and was down again before Mr. Peters had made his adieus.

Away they drove again to the Vicarage; and as they went, Nellie recounted to Georgie and Mr. Peters how she had searched through all the old papers on the floor of the library; how she had turned over the study table to search for secret drawers; and how she had determined, after the old library, to ransack every book in the new.

The rector was at home, and the party was ushered into his study. He looked up from his books with some surprise.

'This is rather an unusual combination,' he said, laughing; 'my merry Georgie and Miss Ashby making a morning visit with the grave lawyer!'

'We come on a merry matter, though at the same

time a serious one,' said Mr. Peters. 'This most energetic young lady, having a sort of presentiment that Mr. Norland's lost will was somewhere in the Abbey, has actually ferreted it out, in its original box; and here it is. Mr. Ashby wishes to hand it over entirely to my care; and I thought, as you are in constant correspondence with Mr. Norland, you would be the right person to convey to him the intelligence that he is now again the possessor of the Abbey.' And Mr. Peters laid the box before him.

'Marvellous!' cried Mr. Brand, taking it up, and examining it all over. 'Let me look at the parchment. Are you sure it is all right?'

'Certain,' said Mr. Peters. 'It was written out in my own office, and I witnessed his signature, together with his old butler. Right enough!' And he displayed the writing before Mr. Brand.

'His own signature indeed, poor old man! How could he be so mischievous as to hide it, where even Lady Constance could not find it? I give you boundless credit,' he said, turning to Nellie. 'You have replaced a good man where he ought to be. Of course I shall not take the house in London. I shall go to meet them at Falmouth, and bring them here, till—' And he looked at Nellie.

'Till we turn out,' said Nellie, laughing. 'I suppose we must do that as soon as possible, as Mr.

Oliver had no right to let us the house. What will he say to me, I wonder ?'

'Ah! he must be written to at once,' said Mr. Peters. 'I suppose his bankers will know his address.'

'I believe that nothing more can be done until Fred Norland arrives,' said Mr. Brand, 'and that will be in about three weeks. Probably he will know where his cousin is.'

'Well then,' said Mr. Peters, rising, 'I must get back to my office again. These early doings are quite a novelty to me.'

'Please stay a few minutes longer,' cried Georgie, 'till I run and tell Mrs. Brand ;' and away went both girls.

Mrs. Brand received their news with enough astonishment and delight to satisfy even Georgie. But she said there was one thing in the affair that did not please her, which was, that her young friends at the Lodge would lose their companion.

'And I,' she said, 'shall miss a most kind helper in my parish matters. Mrs. Ashby will be a loss to my village.'

Nellie coloured with pleasure. 'And I,' she said, 'shall be very sorry to leave the dear old Abbey. I suppose there is always a bad side to everything.'

Mr. Peters sent a message to say he really could

not wait a moment longer ; so the two girls bade adieu to them, and they took their way home again.

‘ You will come in,’ said Georgie, as they stopped at the Lodge.

‘ No,’ replied Nellie, ‘ I must hasten home, for I have scarcely seen mamma to-day, and it will be luncheon time by the time I reach the Abbey. You will take luncheon with me, Mr. Peters ; will you not ?’

‘ Indeed I must also say that I need to hurry home,’ he said ; ‘ but if you will trust me with groom and dog-cart, I will release you from your promise to take me home again.’

‘ Then I think I will say good-bye to you here,’ returned Nellie, ‘ and to my dear box also.’

Mr. Peters waved his hand to them, and drove off.

‘ I cannot come in with you,’ said Nellie. ‘ I do not know what mamma will say to me for my morning’s work. If I can, I will run down this afternoon, or at any rate to-morrow. Suppose you do this, ask Constance to come up with you, and have early tea with me in her own old room. She will not object, now that probably she will so soon inhabit it again.’

‘ Very well,’ said Georgie ; and they parted.

When Nellie reached home, she went to the drawing-room, where her mother sat working.

‘ Have you seen papa ?’ asked Nellie.

‘Yes,’ her mother replied, ‘for a few minutes only ; and he told me that the lost will, which would have secured this place to Mr. Frederic Norland, has been strangely found, and that you could tell me all about it. So, sit down quickly, Nellie, and let me hear. Was it that that took you and your father out so early this morning ? I assure you I felt quite deserted, breakfasting here all alone, and knowing nothing of what had happened.’

‘Dear mamma,’ said Nellie, ‘it was quite my fault, and very thoughtless, to hurry away without telling you. I teased papa to breakfast and go with me to Barnley ; for I found the will, mamma, this morning, when I was rummaging for it in the old library.’

‘Then you were actually looking for it ?’ said her mother. ‘What put it into your head that it was in existence at all ?’

‘I have so often heard Agnes and Georgie talk about it, mamma,’ replied Nellie, ‘and it always seemed to me so very odd that such a will should have been destroyed, especially as the box, too, was missing in which it was always kept, that I felt sure it must be hidden somewhere. And for many mornings past, mamma, I have spent two hours groping in all the odd corners in the old wing, where Mr. Norland lived at the time the will was made. And at last I found it fallen down behind an old cupboard. So I

was delighted, and in such a hurry to show it to Constance, that I could not wait till you were up. Are you vexed, mamma, that I have been the means of turning you out of this pretty comfortable place?’

‘No! my dear,’ returned her mother; ‘how could I be so selfish, so wicked? I rejoice that justice will be done. And all speak so highly both of Mr. Norland and Lady Constance that it will cause universal pleasure that they should be reinstated. But I do regret leaving the Abbey. I am just beginning to know and like the people about.’

‘Perhaps, mamma,’ said Nellie, ‘papa could find us another nice place in this neighbourhood.’

‘Well, he might look about,’ said her mother. ‘Now come to luncheon; you must be hungry after all your work this morning.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Nellie, laughing; ‘for, now I think of it, I believe I had no breakfast to-day.’

As they were finishing luncheon, Mr. Ashby came in.

‘Well, Nellie,’ he said, ‘I suppose your friends were astonished and delighted at your news.’

‘Yes, of course, papa,’ replied Nellie. ‘Poor Constance was pleased to hear that she would have her own nice home again, and all their friends will be glad to have them back. But, mamma, Mrs. Brand said that she and her villagers should regret you very much.’

'I am glad to hear,' said Mrs. Ashby, 'that my liking for them meets with a little return.'

'I have a proposal to make for to-morrow,' said Mr. Ashby. 'I have heard that there is a large place to let or to sell on the other side of Barnley. If you really like this neighbourhood, let us go over to-morrow and look at it well, for certainly Mr. Norland will wish to take possession here as soon as he returns; and though, doubtless, he will give us every consideration, I should not like to hinder his coming. Shall we look at "The Firs?"'

'Pray do, mamma,' cried Nellie. 'I should be so glad to be near the Waltons; and you like the place.'

Mrs. Ashby agreed to go the next day; and Nellie ran down that afternoon to tell the three girls that she must put off her tea until the following day.

Mrs. Ashby only liked to go in the large carriage.

'This reminds me,' cried Nellie, as she seated herself, 'of the time we arrived here. I have scarcely been in this carriage since. And I feel as if I had quite done with my schoolroom, for this is the second day that I have not touched a lesson-book. But to-day it is your doing, mamma, bringing me out early.'

'It is entirely consequent upon your own doing yesterday,' said her mother; 'and I dare say we shall be very unsettled for a time. We shall have to move, packing and all that terrible work.'

‘Never mind, mamma,’ said Nellie, ‘I will do all that ; only take care that you like *The Firs*.’

They did like ‘*The Firs*’ extremely ; and as Mr. Ashby now said that the sooner they moved the better, he paid another visit to Mr. Peters, heard from him that the agreement drawn up between himself and Mr. Oliver Norland was absolutely good for nothing, and that he could not be called on for the rent of the Abbey. He determined to take *The Firs*, and remove there at once. The following day the three girls came to see Nellie. Constance kissed her warmly, as the others did.

‘Welcome to your own room,’ said Nellie, gaily. ‘It will very soon be free to you to come or go, because papa has made up his mind to remove directly ; and he is gone now to take “*The Firs*.”’

‘Oh ! Nellie,’ cried Georgie, ‘are you really going to leave us, and speak so merrily about it, you naughty, unloving girl !’

‘There is nothing to look gloomy about,’ replied Nellie ; ‘for we are only going a few miles farther off, and “*Sultan*” will have more work—that is all. Come, let us have our tea—my last party in this room ; for I expect we shall be off next week. When papa has once made up his mind, he will not rest till he makes the move.’

After their tea, they went to the archery ground ;

but the evenings were now becoming very short, so they soon returned to the house, and amused themselves by playing on the grand piano.

‘How glad I shall be to see my dear mamma at that piano again!’ said Constance. ‘And when they are here, and we are settled again, I want you, Nellie, to promise to come and stay with me.’

‘I will do so with pleasure,’ said Nellie, ‘if your mamma also wishes me to come.’

In ten days the Ashby family left the Abbey, and established themselves at ‘The Firs.’ So Mr. Brand proposed that Mr. Norland and Lady Constance should be taken straight back to their own abode, and that Constance should be there to welcome them. Mrs. Brand came over to the Lodge, to consult Mrs. Walton about servants, and various small details; the result of the consultation being, that a few servants were engaged, and sent into the house, to begin with; and when the time drew near for the arrival of the voyagers, Mr. Brand went to Falmouth to meet them, with the welcome and unexpected news that, instead of going to a small abode in a London street, they could now return to their own dear home.

At the hall door, waiting to receive them, stood Mrs. Walton, her two girls, Constance—crying with delight and excitement,—and Mrs. Brand. When Constance found herself clasped in her mother’s arms,

she thought that the whole world could not contain so happy a girl. She insisted on taking her mother the next day to see Mrs. Ashby and Nellie, and to beg for Nellie to spend some time with her.

‘One week,’ said her father. ‘I really cannot spare my Nellie more than that, even to you, Miss Norland, whom I believe she loves much. But she may go again shortly.’

The first thing that Constance’s father did, was to settle a good and sufficient income upon Oliver.

‘You need not feel this any obligation from me,’ he wrote, ‘for I feel convinced that my uncle would have wished such support to be given to you, had he still thought you living at the time of his death. All his angry feelings had then passed away. And I need only further say, that you have always a home here, when you choose.’

Constance declared that she was so happy now, that she even thought she could be civil to Oliver, should he come back. But her powers were never tried, for he returned to England no more ; and, after an unsettled life, died, a solitary old man, in one of the colonies.

Nellie became a constant visitor at the Abbey, and had, through life, no more firm and warm friend than Constance Norland.

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